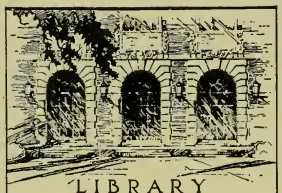
MATRIMONY.



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MATRIMONY.

BY

W. E. NORRIS,

AUTHOR OF "MADEMOISELLE DE MERSAC."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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Vol 2

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MATRIMONY.

CHAPTER I.

TWO DIALOGUES.

If, in the course of the interview just described, Claud and Miss Flemyng had turned their eyes towards the hill-top behind them, instead of alternately studying one another's faces and the ground, they would have seen, standing out in bold relief against the sky, two dark figures, whose relative attitudes corresponded exactly to their own. For the lawns and shrubberies that encircle Southlands abound in winding walks; and although, when young men and maidens saunter out by twos in the gloaming, all paths are likely, figuratively speaking, to lead towards the same point, it is well for the comfort of those concerned that they need not invariably do so in a literal sense.

It was probably a firm conviction of this truth that caused Freddy Croft to set his face in a northerly direction, on perceiving whither the couple which had got the start of him was bound. It was repugnant to his feelings to climb a steep hill immediately after dinner; but of two evils this was so plainly the less that he accepted it cheerfully, saying—

"Do you mind which way we go, Miss Gervis? If it is quite the same thing to you, I should like to try and get a whiff of fresh air up there behind the house. It is rather stifling down below, don't you think?"

Geneviève signified that it was quite the same thing to her; and accordingly they toiled up a series of irregular zigzags, wasting little breath in speech, until they reached the boundary of the pleasure-grounds, beyond which stretched broad fields of wheat and oats and barley that swayed and rustled, as the light wind from the moors swept over them.

Here Geneviève paused, and resting her arms upon the paling, fell into much the same posture as that in which Miss Flemyng was standing, some hundred feet below; while Freddy, whose native graces were hardly equal to Claud's, perched himself upon the barrier and whistled softly, swinging his legs to and fro.

"Rather a bore my getting swamped this afternoon," he began presently, by way of starting the conversation. "I can't think how I managed to do such an idiotic thing. Didn't you all laugh when you saw me floundering about in the water?"

"I did not hear any one laugh," answered Geneviève. "I thought you were going to be drowned."

"No fear. I didn't care a farthing about losing the race—though I do wish that butter-and-eggs chap hadn't won it—but it *was* rather hard lines to be done out of my drive home with you."

Geneviève did not respond. She seemed to be a little out of spirits; and Freddy, watching her, as she abstractedly pulled tufts of moss and lichen from the bar of the wooden fence on which she was leaning, had his doubts as to whether she was listening to him at all.

"You must have taken it easy up the hill," he resumed. "I had time to change all my clothes, and to walk down nearly as far as the lodge to meet you, before you appeared."

"Had you?"

"Yes; but it wasn't much good, after all, was it? As soon as I saw you had got another passenger on board I retired gracefully among the trees. You didn't see me, did you?"

"No," answered Geneviève. "I am sorry you had the walk for nothing."

"Ah, so was I sorry; but I wasn't surprised. Luck always goes in runs, and this doesn't seem to have been my day, somehow. Where did you pick up Mister Rags?"

"Please don't say disagreeable things about him," pleaded Geneviève. "I can't bear to hear people sneered at because they are poor and shabby; and it is not like you to notice such things. How many of the best men that ever lived have often been in want of money!"

"I beg your pardon," said Freddy humbly. "I had not the least intention of saying anything offensive about him, and I dare say he is a—a very good fellow, when you come to know him. Of course, any friend of yours——"

"He is not my friend. I never saw him before to-day: and I am not sure that I like him particularly. Only it vexed me that everybody should despise him just because he wore a shabby coat."

"Indeed I did not despise him," Freddy declared.

"Well, you would not take any notice of him; and all the others looked at him as if they thought he wanted to pick their pockets. And yet, even if he had been a professional

thief, they ought not to have let him see that he was suspected. At least, that is my idea of hospitality. I don't know whether it is yours."

The worldly-wise Freddy replied that Miss Gervis was too generous. Of course every man was innocent until he was proved guilty, and all that sort of thing; but at the same time, there were lots of sharps about, and if one didn't keep one's eyes open, one was safe to be done, you know. He added, somewhat inconsequently, that these remarks were not intended to bear a personal application.

"If I believed a man to be what you call a 'sharp,' I would not ask him to dine with me," said Geneviève; "but, if I had asked a man to dinner, I should think that I was insulting my guests, as well as him, by showing him that I took him for a sharp."

"Oh, I see," said Freddy, "you mean what your father said. The old gentleman did give him one or two nasty ones, certainly. At least, I suppose he did. I didn't understand what it was all about myself; only I saw the fellow wriggling and looking uncomfortable. However, you need not be unhappy about it; there's no harm done. Mr. Gervis began to talk to old Rags—I beg your pardon; M. Hirsch, I mean—directly you had gone out of the room;

and when we left them they were getting on like a house on fire."

"Do you think," asked Geneviève suddenly, "that it is a very dreadful thing to dislike one's own father? But of course it must be. It is horrible and wicked, and against nature; and yet——"

"Oh, I don't think so at all," said Freddy serenely. "If a man is a brute, he must take the consequences."

"He is not quite that."

"What, Mr. Gervis? Oh, of course not; I did not mean him. But some fellows' governors are regular brutes; no other word for them. There's a man I know in the Guards—an awfully good fellow—whose father is worth half a million, if he's worth a penny. Well, you'd hardly believe it, but that old ruffian allows his son—an eldest son, mind you—three hundred a year besides his pay; and a few months ago, what does he do but sticks a notice in the papers saying he won't be responsible for any debts poor Jack may contract! Now an old screw like that is bound to be hated. Can't expect anything else, you know."

Here was a strange kind of confidant for Miss Gervis, whom her few intimates were wont to accuse of excessive reticence, to have

chosen ; but in the lives of all men and women there are moments in which sympathy seems almost a necessity ; and a combination of circumstances, which it would be tedious, and perhaps superfluous, to enumerate, had now brought such a moment to our heroine. It must be remembered, too, that Freddy had, in her estimation, shown himself to be a true and disinterested friend, and that reserved natures seldom bestow their confidence by halves. She passed by his irrelevant reference to the ill-used guardsman, and went on, following her own line of thought :

" It is my fault, I suppose, that we have never got on together. Claud hits it off with him very well, though he sees all the things that I see and knows all that I know—and more, perhaps. Claud makes allowances ; I can't. I must either like people very much or dislike them very much ; and I am afraid it makes no difference whatever to me whether they are my relations or not. In those whom I love I believe I could pardon anything—any cruelty, or wickedness, or neglect—it would not make me change ; but it is not in me to love any one from a sense of duty ; and if I do not love, I—do the reverse."

" That is just the character of all others that

I would have myself, if I could choose," cried Freddy with enthusiasm.

"No," answered Geneviève, rather sadly, "I don't think anybody would choose to be like that; only perhaps it may be some excuse for me that one has no choice in the matter. If my father were ill, and I could nurse him, or if he were in any trouble, and I could help him, I would do it because he is my father; but to be fond of him because he is my father—no; that is impossible."

"Has he been treating you unkindly?" Freddy asked, sliding off the paling on to his feet, and looking quite fierce at the bare idea of such atrocity.

"No; he is never unkind to me; he is even kind, after a fashion, though I don't think it would distress him in the least if I were to die to-night. But there are others to whom he is not only unkind, but positively cruel. I don't know whether you will understand what I mean; but you know how cruel children often are. Claud and I used to torture our dogs in all kinds of ways; and I remember our once putting a cat in walnut-shells and laughing till the tears ran down our cheeks at the absurd way the poor thing floundered about on the polished *parquet*."

"I have always delighted in seeing a pig killed myself," interjected Freddy meditatively.

"We got into great trouble about the cat. I daresay we were thoughtless, heartless little wretches in many ways; but I know that when some friends took us to see those horrible serpents at the Jardin des Plantes fed upon live birds and rabbits, we could not bear it, and we both ran away, crying as if our hearts would break. There was one boy who stayed, and saw it all. I abhorred that boy ever afterwards. He is a man now, and I abhor him still."

"I think I see what you mean," said Freddy, stroking his fair moustache reflectively. "It makes a lot of difference whether a fellow is cruel without meaning it, or in the way of sport, and that, or whether he is cruel because he likes it."

"Yes; it is a horrible thing to enjoy the sight of suffering. So far as the hatefulness of the enjoyment is concerned, I can't see that it matters much whether the pain is bodily or mental, or even whether the amount of it is great or small. It seems to me that there is not much to choose between a boy who sticks pins through living butterflies, for the pleasure of watching their dying struggles, and a man

whose chief amusement is to hurt people's feelings or to make them look ridiculous. Only the boy is whipped and sent to bed, whereas the man is admired and applauded as a wit."

"But don't you think," began Freddy, with some hesitation—for he was wavering between a strong habitual bias in favour of giving the devil his due and an equally strong disinclination to connect his feminine ideal with the remotest suspicion of injustice—"don't you think that you are a little bit hard upon Mr. Gervis? I mean to say, things might hurt your feelings, you know, which wouldn't trouble other people for a moment. Some fellows have such precious thick hides! Look at me, for instance. He might go on chaffing, if it amused him, till all was blue, and I shouldn't care a rap."

"That is partly because you are too kind-hearted yourself to believe that any one could really mean to vex you," said Geneviève, laughing a little, "and partly because he hasn't it in his power to hurt you seriously. If you were in the position of that poor man whom he is tormenting at this moment you would understand him better. But I know what you must think of me for saying all this; and you are quite right. There are things which

ought never to be said, whether they are true or not."

Upon this Freddy took the opportunity of stating his opinion of Miss Gervis with much warmth and a free use of superlatives; and so the dialogue took a turn more interesting to the speakers, but less so, perhaps, to the outer world. The reader's heart is, in all probability, harder than Geneviève's, and is not likely to suffer any very severe pangs if he is asked to return for a few minutes to the dining-room, and to look on at the supposed martyrdom of M. Hirsch.

No sooner had Mr. Flemyng's bulky form disappeared through the glass doors that opened upon the terrace than that gentleman drew his chair a little closer to his host's, and pouring out a glass of claret for himself with a mixture of bravado and nervousness, proceeded straight to business.

"You will understand, Mr. Gervis," he began, "that I should not have been so bold as to make my way into your house unless I had had a communication to make to you."

Gervis inclined his head slightly.

"Sir, I will be frank with you; I will conceal nothing."

"Thank you very much," said Mr. Gervis sweetly. "May I offer you a cigarette?"

The stranger accepted the proffered civility, lighted his cigarette with a rather shaky hand, and resumed:

"I want money; I prefer to say so at once. You will perhaps think me a blackguard——"

A slight gesture of Mr. Gervis's hand seemed to express polite acquiescence.

"Mon Dieu! it is not I who shall contradict you; but when one is reduced to starvation, and when one has information which is worth money, one does not give it away. You will have guessed at once that what I have to say refers to the Princess Ouranoff—your wife. Ah, sir, that woman has treated me abominably!—horribly! For all these years I have been her friend; I would have been her friend still—yes! her friend, sir, and not yours; for it has been my weakness to sacrifice duty to compassion—but the time has now come when I can no longer be silent. Only three days ago I arrived from South America. I landed at Southampton with only three shillings in my pocket; I have walked from thence to this place, living on crusts of bread, sleeping in barns—in ditches—where I could; and now, what do I find? That she has gone away; that she is in France, amusing herself with her gay friends; that she has not so much as left

a message for me; that she is out of my reach. I was hungry; I was half-dead with fatigue; I felt all my strength leave me—what could I do?"

The man's voice broke; and he paused for a moment, with an emotion which appeared to be genuine enough.

"M. Hirsch," said Gervis, "you distress me. Pray help yourself. And so the Princess refused to pay any more black-mail?"

For an instant the expression of M. Hirsch's face changed. A vicious look showed itself about the corners of his mouth and a gleam shot from between his blinking eyelids. He took some more claret, however, and continued:

"You put things in plain language, Mr. Gervis. After all, why not? *J'aime autant ça.* On my side, I will avail myself of the same privilege. I may tell you that the story of your married life is no secret to me. I know that for years past you have only been the husband of the Princess Ouranoff in name. I know that you have had many suspicions, but no proofs. I know that you would give much to be rid, once and for all, of the woman who has deceived and disgraced you. Is it not so?"

Gervis laid his head on one side, and sur-

veyed his interlocutor with a certain pensive curiosity, but said nothing.

"Now," proceeded M. Hirsch, taking silence for consent, "supposing that I had it in my power to insure you absolute freedom from her as soon as you please?"

"How much," inquired Gervis in his blandest tones, "how much, my dear sir, did you think of asking for this priceless boon?"

"Twenty thousand pounds sterling—neither more nor less," answered the other firmly. "It is a large sum; but you are a rich man; and liberty is worth that, and more than that, to you. Moreover, you would actually economize by the transaction, I believe; for what is the interest of twenty thousand pounds at five per cent? A mere thousand a year, is it not? I shall be much surprised to hear that the Princess Ouranoff has not cost you more than that, beyond her private fortune, for some years past."

"M. Hirsch, it is evident that I can keep nothing back from you; and really your moderation astonishes me. But has it not occurred to you that, if the conclusive evidence which you hint at exists, I might possibly obtain it without your aid, and so save my twenty thousand?"

"Impossible, Mr. Gervis. You may take it as absolutely certain that unless you regain your liberty through me, you will never regain it at all. I am the only man living who holds the requisite proofs. For the rest, you have but to remember how long it is that you have been searching high and low in vain for what you want in order to see that this is not a case in which detectives and spies can be of any service to you."

"Too true! And you really will not take less than twenty thousand pounds?"

"Sir, I have said it. I am a man of my word. See now, Mr. Gervis, I will place myself in your hands without reserve. With half a dozen words I will undertake to convince you of the truth of my statement; I will rely upon your honour then to hand me a cheque, a promissory note, or what you will, for the money; and in a few weeks' time, at furthest, proofs which no court of law could withstand for one moment shall be in your hands. Is it a bargain?"

"Ah well, M. Hirsch," said Gervis, throwing the end of his cigarette out of the window, "you are a shocking rascal, I am afraid; but your impudence has afforded me some little amusement. Will you have any more wine, or shall we join the ladies now?"

"What is the meaning of this? Please to speak plainly, sir," returned the other in a hoarse voice. His eyelids had stopped blinking; two vertical lines had appeared on his retreating forehead; his pointed chin was slightly thrust forward. He presented altogether as striking a type of the born assassin as any physiognomist could wish to study.

"Why, the meaning of it, my good creature," replied Mr. Gervis, "is simply that your little plan has failed. In forming it, you appear to have forgotten, or to have been ignorant of, two trifling circumstances—firstly, that you were speaking to a gentleman, and secondly, that you were not speaking to an absolute fool. I am not going to say anything indignant about your attacks upon the character of an absent lady—still less about the flattering estimate which you seem to have formed of my own morality. I very rarely allow myself to be angry—never with persons of your description. You will admit that it would be hardly worth my while. What I should have thought might have been patent to you is that I should never believe, or pay for, a single word that you uttered, whether supported by what you call proof or not. I remember you quite well at Wiesbaden, where you entered yourself in the

visitors' book at the hotel under I forget what Russian name ending in off or eff. Doubtless it was not your own—if that signified. Do you know, M. Hirsch, that the only hopeful symptom I have observed in your case is that you are by no means an accomplished liar."

The languid drawl with which these sentences were enunciated more than doubled their insulting significance. The stranger, whose face had turned as white as the table-cloth before him, lost all control over his passion. Trembling, and muttering a curse, he leapt to his feet, and caught up a knife that lay beside his plate.

The next instant, his right arm was thrown up above his head and held there powerless in a firm grasp, while the knife was jerked out of his hand on to the floor. Mr. Gervis let him go at once, and fell back in his chair, laughing heartily.

"M. Hirsch, you are the most comical ruffian I ever encountered. Are you aware that you have been threatening my life with a dessert-knife? Never mind; your intentions were good; and if I did not happen to be tolerably strong in the wrists still, in spite of my age, I dare say you might have startled me. As it is, I have to thank you for a dramatic finish to a most entertaining evening."

The man was cowed—as much, perhaps, by the ridicule of his host as by the consciousness that he was too physically weak to be formidable to anybody. "Will you allow me," he asked humbly, "to say a few more words upon the subject which——"

"Thank you, no," answered Mr. Gervis. "On the contrary, if you so much as allude to it again, I shall ring the bell, and tell the servants to turn you out at the front door."

"That shall not be necessary," said M. Hirsch, rising. "You are a hard man, Mr. Gervis; but you are not so clever as you think yourself. I wish you good evening."

He had his hand upon the door-handle when Mr. Gervis stopped him. "Wait one moment, M. Hirsch. Where do you propose to sleep to-night?"

The man shrugged his shoulders silently.

"Please to sit down. I will be with you again directly.

Mr. Gervis left the room, and presently returned, with his slow, weary step, holding a bundle of bank-notes in his hand. "Here are fifty pounds," said he; "it is all the spare cash I have by me. Rascality, M. Hirsch, arises mainly out of adverse circumstances. The human family is composed of members of various

shades and colours; and with a slight effort I find that I can recognize in you an erring brother. With this money you will at least be able to find your way to the Princess, whom you will no doubt bully for more. I am sorry I can't see my way to protecting her from you. I am sorry, also, that I cannot offer you a bed; but conventionality must be respected up to a certain point. Good-bye. Don't let me see you again, please."

M. Hirsch looked at Gervis and looked at the notes. Necessity has no law. He took them, without a word of acknowledgment, and went away.

"Poor devil!" mused Gervis aloud, lighting another cigarette, as he heard the hall-door slam behind his late visitor. "I dare say he knows something. Or was it only the old story perhaps? To think of his taking up a silver knife to me—ha, ha, ha! I wonder now whether, if I had been in his place, I should have chosen to accept that money or starve. Dear me, what a farce it all is, to be sure!"

CHAPTER II.

MR. FLEMYNG'S DAHLIAS.

A BACHELOR friend of mine, who was once highly susceptible to feminine charms, but has now reached a period of life at which he can view the agitations of bygone days in the calm light of reason, and analyze them with a mixture of self-pity and self-complacency, is fond of broaching a theory to the effect that there is some intimate connection between the progress of the tender passion and the course of the seasons. It has invariably been so, he says, in his own case. Upon each occasion he has felt the first stirrings of his heart in the spring; the summer has seen him falling more and more deeply in love; September and the partridges have brought him the first faint symptoms of a diminution of the fever; with October a perceptible coolness has set in; and he has been quite his own man again at

the commencement of the hunting season. Warned by repeated experiences of this nature, he has learnt, in all recent attacks, what to expect; and recognizing the approach of the familiar malady, has possessed his soul in patience, knowing full well that, with a little self-command, he will escape scathless, and live to see his illusions slowly waning with the waning of the year.

According to this authority, the month of August is the time when a prudent man should take most heed to his ways. It is a time of holiday-making for some, of idleness for nearly all; a time in which the common pursuits of men are very generally also those of women; a time of long days and warm, dry evenings. If this dangerous moment be but safely tided over, says my friend, there is good hope of the sufferer's recovery; and he professes to have observed that more engagements are announced in the course of the month in question than during any other four weeks of the year. My own experience does not enable me to endorse my friend's theory at all points; but I am inclined to go with him in that part of it which refers to the perils of August—and more especially of a fine August.

Now it so fell out that the summer which

witnessed the return of the Gervis family to England was an exceptional one. Day after day the sun shone down in his strength upon woodland and meadow and sea; what rain there was fell in short, sharp thunder-showers, and passed away; the peaches ripened a good fortnight before their time; on either side of the narrow field-paths the corn rose above a man's head; the nights were starry and still; and through it all Claud walked, as in a fool's paradise, vaguely rejoicing in the beauty of life, but seeing no object with any distinctness, save the graceful figure of Nina Flemyng.

A man who lives in a fool's paradise—by which, I take it, is meant an individual who, for the time being, has lost his bearings, and neither knows nor cares whither the sequence of events may be hurrying him—is doubtless, from the terms of the proposition, a fool. Yet, since some such failure of mental stability may be regarded as an almost necessary condition of love, and as the obvious deduction that all lovers must be fools is one which will hardly meet with universal acceptance, no special apology on this score seems needful on behalf of Claud, who indeed was by no means one of that class of persons which, in a general way, allows itself to be ruled by circumstances rather than be at the pains of ruling them.

If he had lacked some one definite programme in life, the fault had not been his, but his father's, who, while debarring him from the exercise of a profession, had omitted to suggest to him any other outlet for surplus energy; but certain objects he had set before himself, and had worked up to patiently—such as the establishment of a home for his erratic father in England, the closing of the chronic family breach, and the earning of a name for himself by means of literature. For all these things he had laboured steadily, devoting himself to the last of them not so much because he felt any pressing vocation thereto as because it had appeared to him that he had no alternative between achieving success with his pen and existing as a mere loafer upon the face of the earth. Then fate had brought the course of his life into contact with that of Nina Flemyng; her fascinations had made a more or less easy conquest of his heart; and in regard to this matter it must be confessed that definiteness of aim had deserted him. Some people there are, no doubt, who, after the first discovery that their affections are engaged, begin with laudable prudence to forecast results, and seeing the altar and the domestic hearth looming sternly at the end of the pleasant path of

courtship, ask themselves whether they shall advance or retreat while the option yet rests with them; but these have seldom a strain of southern blood in their veins. Claud vexed himself with no such dispassionate calculations. Matrimony was to him at most a vague possibility; a blissful dream which it would be almost a profanation to associate with considerations so common-place as settlements, furniture, trousseaux, and the like. The essential matter was that Nina had become dearer to him than the whole world, and that his happiness must henceforth be made or marred by her alone.

Naturally, therefore, he spent a great part of his time at the Moated House, where his reception varied with the changing moods of its capricious young mistress, but where he was in any case sure of one unaffected welcome; for Mr. Flemyng had taken a fancy to the young fellow—as fathers of families not unfrequently do to young fellows of good expectations—and would often beg him to consider himself as in all respects one of the family, and to remember that there was a vacant place ready for him at the dinner-table whenever it might suit him to occupy it. A general invitation is by common repute equivalent to no invitation; but Claud

did not take this narrow view of Mr. Flemyng's proffered hospitality, nor was he slow in finding one pretext or another for availing himself of it. Truth to tell, he dined, in those days, nearly as often at the Moated House as at Southlands, no man hindering him; for Mr. Gervis made it a rule never to remark upon the absence of an inmate of his household, or to put any of those embarrassing questions with which some injudicious parents persist in harassing their adult offspring.

Invading Mr. Flemyng's premises thus informally, one evening shortly after the Beachborough regatta day, Claud found his entertainer in a state of unwonted perturbation and excitement. The worthy gentleman's cheeks were flushed; his white hair, ordinarily so smoothly brushed, was ruffled; he was pacing to and fro with gestures indicative of anything but philosophic composure.

"An abominable outrage has been committed!" cried he, too eager to communicate the dreadful news to waste any time in preliminary forms of greeting. "Five-and-twenty years have I sat upon the bench as one of the justices of the peace for this county, and I have no hesitation in saying that for wanton, dastardly brutality, for diabolical ingenuity of con-

ception and execution, this case is without a parallel in my experience. That I am myself the victim of this atrocious piece of wickedness is a minor matter: I put that consideration away from me. But this I will say, that a neighbourhood in which such deeds can be perpetrated is an immoral neighbourhood, a neighbourhood which needs to be recalled to its senses by the strong arm of the law, and that I heartily regret that the powers intrusted to us do not authorize me to condemn the offender to—to corporal chastisement."

"When caught," added Nina, rather unfeelingly.

"Caught! If we had a constabulary worthy of the name he would have been in custody by now. If I had been informed of the facts before I left the house this morning, instead of having been, most improperly, kept in ignorance of them until an hour ago, it is more than probable that I should have been able to trace the fellow myself. But of course the footprints, which as evidence would have been simply invaluable, are carefully raked out before I am told. Persons who are guilty of such acts of stupidity are, to all intents and purposes, *participes criminis*."

"What in the world has happened?" asked Claud.

"Why, some miscreant has stolen into my garden in the dead of the night, and has utterly destroyed the best part of my dahlias."

Claud was ill-advised enough to murmur, "Is that all?"

"*All!* Upon my word! Well, really——" For once Mr. Flemyng's feelings were too deeply stirred to find relief in declamation. He could only snort, and wave his hands speechlessly, as if calling upon the higher powers to bear witness to the callousness of man.

Nina made a grimace at Claud, who hastened to apologize, explaining that he had feared that some more serious loss of property had befallen his friends; but Mr. Flemyng was not to be pacified all at once. The intrinsic value of the flowers was not, he confessed, very great, if measured by the mere vulgar standard of market prices; though, to be sure, they had not been brought to their late state of perfection without some considerable outlay. But their worth as evidences of taste and skill, their worth, as a harmonious combination of colours, in delighting the eyes and elevating the minds of all beholders—their æsthetic worth, in short, if Mr. Flemyng made himself understood—this was something altogether beyond the scope of appraisement. Nevertheless, he went on to

say, it was not so much the damage done as the manner in which it had been done that made his blood boil. Theft, Mr. Flemyng was pleased to say, that he could understand. Theft, though necessarily punishable by the laws which hold society together, was an offence for which the philosophic mind could readily conceive of sundry palliations. But this was no case of theft. The flowers, some broken off their stems, some torn up by their roots, had been found scattered in different parts of the garden. The inference was clear: an enemy had done this thing.

"Now I ask you," cried Mr. Flemyng, in conclusion, "what pretext have I ever given to any man, woman, or child in the county for behaving to me in such a disgraceful way? Whom have I injured? To whom have I not been, so far as in me lay, a benefactor? Can a single instance of harshness or injustice, public or private, be brought against me?"

With the irritability of a vain man, Mr. Flemyng went on putting this question in various forms for the next hour and a half. There could clearly be only one answer to it; but it was evident that there existed somewhere a perverse being who, if he could have been heard, would not have returned that true

answer; and therein lay the sting. Mr. Flemyng's whole thinking power was so saturated with self-approbation, he had so firm and full a belief in himself as not only a wise but a beneficent creature, that any proof of the ill-will of his fellow-men shocked as much as it surprised him. The bare idea that such depravity could be was enough—not indeed to take away his appetite; for that was probably more than any calamity could achieve—but to considerably mar his gratification of it; and thus it fell out that he quarrelled with his dinner, and made things very unpleasant for the attendant butler and footboy in the parentheses of an unending oration.

Claud, it is scarcely necessary to say, felt no great interest in Mr. Flemyng or his dahlias; but he had no objection at all to the philosopher's rolling periods, under cover of which, as the experience of many a previous evening had taught him, two persons who understood one another could interchange looks and murmured words quite satisfactorily.

So they three sat in the old oak-panelled dining-room, while the twilight deepened into darkness, and were content after their several fashions; and doubtless the butler, surveying them all with the calm eye of an outsider,

derived some amusement from the various descriptions of folly exhibited by his superiors. "No fool like a *h*old fool!"—such was his subsequent criticism upon the head of the establishment; and as for the remarks which he thought fit to indulge in with regard to his mistress, they were so wanting in proper respect that they shall not be recorded here.

Like many other good men, Mr. Flemyng was subject to an invincible and habitual drowsiness after dinner. Claud and Nina left him slumbering peacefully in the library, and betook themselves to that retired spot under the cedar-tree where, some weeks before, their acquaintance had taken so prompt a stride towards intimacy. It was a still, moonlight night, and the silence which comes with darkness was broken only by an occasional echo of laughter from the distant servants' hall, or when the harsh cry of a night-jar arose from the shrubbery behind the house.

"Have you ever an intense longing to be somebody else?" asked Nina suddenly.

"Well, no," answered Claud, "I don't think so. Have you?"

"Yes; nearly always. At the present moment, for instance, I would give anything to be you."

"You would make a poor exchange there," Claud remarked. "Why should you wish for such a thing?"

"Why? Because I suspect that you are thoroughly enjoying yourself. Because I believe that you are as nearly as possible happy and pleased with life, sitting here. The difference between us is that I am not."

Claud said he was very sorry to hear it. Should he go away?

"Don't be idiotic. You know quite well that I like talking to you; or, if you did not know it before, you are welcome to the information now. You remember how I shocked you, some time ago, by telling you that flirtation was one of my enjoyments; and if we are not flirting now, we are at all events doing what everybody calls flirting; which is a pleasant enough way of passing the time, as far as it goes. Only please abstain from saying pretty things and talking down to my level; otherwise you might as well be that plunger from Lynchester barracks, whose name I have forgotten—or anybody else. Don't you see that I am trying to rise to what papa calls 'an elevated strain of thought?' I am contemplating life as a whole; and that is why I say I should like to be you."

"I don't see why my life as a whole should seem better worth having than yours," said Claud.

"Nonsense! What can my life be?—what can any woman's life be? Even with the very best of luck—such as marrying a duke with £300,000 a year—there would be nothing to look forward to but year after year of monotony. But your life is your own to do what you like with. With your talents, you will soon make yourself famous; and as you have money and good looks and a tolerably pleasant manner into the bargain, there will be nothing to prevent you going out as much as you please in London and staying in the best houses in the country. And if, some morning, you wake up and discover that that sort of thing is becoming a great bore—as I know I should in your place—all you have to do is to start off for Texas to shoot buffaloes, or for India to stick pigs, or to the Arctic regions to look for the North Pole. And then, as soon as you have had enough of barbarism, you can come back to civilization again, and go in for whatever may happen to take your fancy at the time. Oh yes; men have the best of the game always and in everything."

"Well, perhaps," Claud admitted; "but the

fact of being a man does not necessarily imply such absolute freedom ; and as for me, I don't know that I care very much about absolute freedom, after all. I should not like to have no ties ; and certainly I should be sorry to break those that keep me here."

"I know. I began by saying that I envied you because you were contented. Things as they are at present satisfy you. You ask for nothing better than to live like this, sailing, fishing, prawning, playing cricket and lawn-tennis all day, dining here in a quiet sort of way, and perhaps scribbling a few lines before you go to bed. Small blame to you!—it isn't a bad kind of life for summer weather ; and when you weary of it, you can march on, and forget it."

"I think you know that I am not likely to forget these last weeks," said Claud ; "and as for the life, I could never weary of it."

"What ? do you mean to say that you would like to devote the remainder of your days to playing cricket and lawn-tennis, and catching whiting-pouts, and the rest of it ? "

This certainly had not been Claud's meaning. What he had intended to imply was that he could never weary of Nina Flemyng ; but the time seemed hardly ripe as yet for the expres-

sion in plain words of such a sentiment; or rather he exaggerated the probable effect of it, being little versed in women's ways, and without suspicion that his companion had listened to many much warmer protestations and had learnt to estimate them at their proper value. Claud, in fact, was still very young, and for all his knowledge of the world in a geographical sense, was barely beginning to make acquaintance with it socially. So all he said was :—

"I don't want to be always idle, of course. No doubt I should tire of idleness, if that is what you mean. But I don't think you do mean only that when you talk as you are doing to-night. Your idea seems to be that, sooner or later, one must tire of everything—friends and all."

"Exactly: that is just my idea. There is only one thing on earth, I fancy, that never palls; and that is work. Man was born to labour and sorrow, you know; only the labour and the sorrow don't go together. You men, whatever you may say, love work. If you have a profession, you think about it a great deal more than about anything else; and if you haven't, you make some other occupation for yourselves; and that is your life. All the rest is mere interlude and by-play. But we women

—at least, nine out of every ten of us—have no occupation; for I don't call housekeeping and looking after troublesome brats an occupation; and so we have to fall back upon excitement as a *pis-aller*. There is a mild excitement in making a man fancy himself desperately in love with you for a few weeks or months."

"Have you often done that?" Claud asked, in a somewhat tremulous voice.

"Three or four times," answered Nina coolly. "Dreadful, isn't it?"

"It is a rather cruel form of sport, I think."

"Not in the least, I assure you. Broken hearts are things of the past, if there ever were such things at all; and I haven't a doubt but that, if you could make a canvass of all the middle-aged gentlemen in the world, you would find forty-nine grateful rejected ones for one who thanked Heaven that he had been accepted."

"Well, say there was one in fifty capable of loving once and for always. What if you happened to meet with that one."

"Ah, if I did! But how should I know him? He wouldn't have himself labelled, I suppose. You see, the unfortunate part of it is that every one, as soons as he falls in love, thinks it is for the first and only time."

"You might test him in a thousand ways, as I dare say you know better than I do. And don't you think, Miss Flemyng—perhaps it is rather presumptuous in me to suggest it—but don't you think that it is just possible that, some day, while you were amusing yourself by playing with some one else's heart, you might chance to lose your own?"

"Oh yes; *taut va la cruche à l' eau*—There is that chance upon the cards; and it adds to the excitement. All the same, I can't fancy myself in the part of a love-lorn maiden. I like change and amusement and fine clothes—all the things that frivolous people like, in short: I am afraid I should never make a good *pendant* for the ideal young man. And yet—"

The last two monosyllables fell from the speaker's lips with a certain dreamy and caressing intonation. And indeed throughout this interview Miss Flemyng's voice had seemed to Claud's ear to belie in some measure the hardness of her words.

"I wish—" he began. But to what desire he was about to give utterance will never be known; for Nina arrested him suddenly by laying her hand on his arm.

"Hush!" she whispered. "Didn't you hear something?"

Claud listened. For a moment or two there was profound stillness. Then he fancied he could detect a faint rustling somewhere far away in the darkness. Then came distinctly a snapping, tearing sound; and he knew at once what was going on. "By jove!" he exclaimed, "it is that fellow at the dahlias again."

"Oh, what fun!" cried Nina, starting to her feet. "Now we shall catch him. You go that way, and I will go this. He can't escape."

"No, no," whispered Claud; "you must not think of such a thing. How could you stop a man? Stay where you are, and keep quite quiet. I'll undertake to hold him; and if I call, you can alarm the house. But please on no account do anything until you hear me call. Will you promise me that?"

"All right," answered Nina, sitting down again. "Don't be longer than you can help, though."

A natural feminine tremor prompted her to add, as an afterthought, "And take care of yourself."

But Claud was already out of earshot, and so missed this last injunction. He stole noiselessly across the turf towards the famous dahlia-beds, taking care to keep between them and the bridge, so as to anticipate the chance of a dash

for escape in that direction. The moat, which had lost all definiteness of outline on the side of the park, and sloped outwards in an irregular grassy bank, was still represented on the garden side by ancient brick-work, forming a clear drop of ten feet or more—an awkward place to run for at night, as Claud thought with inward satisfaction. He advanced on tip-toe till he could distinctly see a dark figure hastily pulling up and casting aside plant after plant, and then, saying aloud, "Now, my man, I think I have got you," sprang upon the delinquent.

Now Claud, having had the advantage of several minutes in which to decide upon his tactics, knew very well what he was going to do. The enemy, surprised and taken in the rear, would probably surrender at discretion; but in order to make a certainty of the capture, it would be advisable to force his arms behind his back and pinion them; and with this end in view, our friend, having judged his handkerchief hardly stout enough for the purpose, had prudently slipped off his braces, and held them in readiness in his left hand. Unfortunately "the best laid schemes o' mice and men gang aft a-gley," as many a painstaking general has found out ere now, to his cost. Claud's first sensation, after pouncing upon the foe, was the

violent jerking of his own legs from under him; immediately after which he found himself lying ignobly prone upon the sward, while the sound of a heavy body dropping into the moat, and the scrambling of footsteps upon the further side, brought home to him a dismal conviction of failure. Claud was up and across the park after the fugitive like a bird, thirst for vengeance being now added to a sense of public duty. The fellow had not got much of a start, after all, and from the thump, thump, thump of his flying feet upon the grass, it was evident that he was a heavily built man, wearing heavy boots, whom a good runner should have no difficulty in overtaking. Claud sped after the sound, wishing vainly that there were a moon—wishing still more that that unlucky idea of removing his braces had not occurred to him. An incident in M. About's "Roi des Montagnes," wherein a similar mischance proves fatal, not to the pursuer, but to the pursued, flashed across his memory; and in truth a slim man running without braces is a heavily handicapped creature. Claud, however, without relaxing his speed, managed to effect a conjunction between button and buttonhole which does not appear to have suggested itself to M. Hermann Schultz; and, thus relieved, soon had the satisfaction of dis-

covering that he was gaining upon the chase. The latter was plainly visible now, as was also the boundary of the park, consisting of a wire fence and a hedge. Through this the man crashed headlong; through it, a moment later, plunged Claud, only to find himself standing foolishly alone in the road, with neither sight nor sound to guide him farther.

"Hang it! he can't be far off," muttered Claud, peering to right and left; and sure enough, there, sitting quietly on a bank by the roadside, with his elbows on his knees, was a man, who neither stirred nor made any effort to escape on being approached. Claud drew nearer, and stooping down, looked into his face.

"I thought as much!" he exclaimed. "Upon my soul, Tom Burvill, you ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"Good evening to you, sir," answered the other, bringing out his words with some difficulty in a series of gasps. "I ain't done nothing fur to be ashamed of, sir—not as I knows. I am a-setting here, sir—fur to enjoy the cool air—wot I often does of a night. Which the Queen's high-way, sir—is free to all, I believe."

"Now, Tom, really this won't do, you know. It is bad enough to have destroyed Mr. Flemyng's dahlias and knocked me off my

legs; but to pretend that I have not run you down and caught you fairly is a little too bad. Why, you are so pumped that you can hardly speak now."

"'Tis spavins of the heart, sir—which I have had them from a boy. I don't know nothing about no dahlias, sir."

"Well," said Claud, laughing, "if you can get the magistrates to believe that story, so much the better for you."

"Magistrates!" ejaculated the man in a tone of deep disgust. "Catch them believing of a honest man upon his oath! Why, that there blooming old Flemyng is one on 'em hisself, ain't he? Come now, Mr. Claud, you ain't never a-going to get a pore chap into trouble, arter all the sport we've had together, surely! Magistrits indeed! oh Lord!"

"I don't want to get you into trouble, Tom," answered Claud. "Indeed I rather had it in my mind to let you off for this once, though I certainly ought not to do anything of the kind. But you must make a clean breast of it first; and you must promise not to do this again. Of course I understand that revenge was at the bottom of it; I heard what happened to your father the other day. But you might have had the sense to see that Mr. Flemyng did no more

than his duty; and anyhow it was rather a shabby bit of spite to go and tear up his flowers."

"Well, sir, if so be as his flowers have a-bin tore up, and if they've a-bin tore up by me—which I do not admit it, sir—wot I says is, sarve the old blackguard right!"

"Tom, I can't listen to this. Mr. Flemyng is a respectable and—er—benevolent gentleman, and a particular friend of my own, and if you wish to call him names, you must do so when I am not present."

"Well, sir, friends of yourn shall not be spoke against by me—leastways, not more'n is just and fair; for when you're called upon to name a cur, why, cur it must be, and 't'ain't no manner o' use fur to say greyhound nor foxhound. But seeing what you and yours has done for us, 'twould be a dirty thing fur to go agin your wishes; and I humbly ask your pardon, sir, for laying of you on your back yonder—that is, if 'twere me as done it—but there's times when a man has to think fust of his own safety, and can't help being a bit rough-like; and 'twas better fur me to take you orf yer legs than to knock you down, you see, sir—that is, if 'twere me as done it, which I do not admit nothink of the sort, sir."

"All right, Tom. You didn't hurt me, and I bear no malice."

"Thank you, sir, kindly; and as I were a-saying, your goodness, and wot Mr. Gervis done for us, I shall not forget it; nor yet father won't; and as for that there old Flemyng, seeing as he's a friend of yourn—and more's the pity, if you'll escuse o' me saying so, sir—why, he shan't be molested no more. That is, if 'twere me as——"

"Never mind the formula, Tom; we'll take that as understood. But what has my father ever done for you? I did not think he had even heard your name."

"Lord! ain't he told yer? Well, I don't know as I ought to speak; but there!—you won't let it go no further, sir. Why, 'twas t'other day, when father got into a bit of trouble about that there partridge—a old bird, sir, and a pore lean thing as couldn't have belonged to no one in partic'lar—little enough to make such a outcry over. You bin told the whole story, sir, I dessay. Well, father come out o' court feeling terrible down, thinking of wot mother and the children was to do, with times so bad and him in quod, when up comes Mr. Gervis quite quiet; and, 'Mr. Burvill,' he says, 'I dessay you ain't got no change in yer pocket;

allow me,' he says—just like that—and outs with the money. Father, he were that flustered, wot with the surprise, and wot with his trouble, and having bin kep' so long with old Flemyng a-staring at him gorgeous-like from the bench" —(What stray echo of mythology could have suggested this adjective to Tom's imagination?) —"that he could'nt have spoke a word to save hisself, and let the gen'leman go without so much as a thank you. But when he come out arterwards he sees Mr. Gervis a-standing on the steps, and goes up fur to say wot was right. 'That'll do,' says Mr. Gervis, rather short; 'I don't want no thanks. I come here to be amused,' he says, 'and I spent a werry pleasant arternoon,' he says; 'and werry pleased to pay for it,' he says. 'And lookee here,' he says; 'there ain't no call for you to talk about this, you understand.' 'As *you* please, sir,' says father. 'Tis betwigst you and me, sir, and though not spoke of shall not be forgot. And we'll drink your jolly good health, sir, to-night,' says father. Mr. Gervis, he looks at father curous-like. 'You're a disrepitable old person, Mr. Burvill,' he says. 'I suspect you'll be hung if you live long enough. But go on drinking your friends' healths, and maybe you'll cheat the gallus yet,' says he. Them was his

words. 'Go on drinking your friends' healths, and maybe you'll cheat the gallus yet.' Haw, haw, haw! You should hear father tell it. 'Tis enough to make you bust yourself laughing."

Claud felt that he could listen to the witticism which had so greatly tickled the Burvills, father and son, without much fear of being overtaken by such a catastrophe as Tom suggested; but he laughed nevertheless, partly out of complaisance, and partly because the story had been a very pleasant one to him. "How like the governor!" he thought. "He is always helping lame dogs over stiles, only he gets no credit for it, because he doesn't care to blow his own trumpet. I shall tell Gen about this." Then Tom—always protecting himself by an occasional reiteration of his saving-clause—went on to relate how a burning desire to "be even with that there old Flemyng" had led him into wreaking vengeance upon the unoffending dahlias, expressed some qualified contrition for his misdeeds, and in consideration of being allowed to evade the just consequences of them, bound himself to refrain from such lawless acts for the future. It is painful to be obliged to add that this evil-doer was finally furnished with the wherewithal to drink his captor's health.

And so these two prepared to part upon

terms of mutual good-will. But before he said good-night, Tom deemed it incumbent upon him to deliver himself of a well-meant caution.

"Begging your pardon, sir," he said, "I hope there ain't nothing betwigst you and the young lady there."

"Don't be impertinent, Tom," said Claud, good-humouredly enough.

"I will not, sir. But take my word for it, sir, them Flemyngs is no good. We fishermen knows more'n you think, sir, and as for that there Miss Nina, she's a owdacious one, and no mistake about it. She's too fond of gen'lemen at large to stick long to one, married or unmarried, is that young 'oman. I seen her with 'em times an' agin. One day 'tis this one, next day 'tis that. Last year 'twas Sir Frederick; now 'tis you, sir, axin' your pardon. Means no offence, sir; but I thought 'twas only right to put you on your guard like."

Claud of course rebuked his over-zealous counsellor; but for all that, the rough warning, coupled with the remembrance of Nina's own confessions, had the effect of somewhat lowering his spirits, and it was in a pensive mood that he walked back towards the house to announce his failure to arrest the thief.

Nina, tired of waiting outside in the dark,

had returned to the library, where Claud found her sitting with her father. It thus became necessary that some account of the evening's adventure should be given to Mr. Flemyng, who was greatly incensed when he heard that the miscreant had escaped scot-free.

"I will spare neither pains nor expense to bring him to justice!" cried he wrathfully. "To-morrow evening I shall station two policemen in the garden."

Claud said he thought that would be an excellent plan, and then rose to take his leave, being perfectly aware, as he did so, that his meagre statement had by no means satisfied Nina, and that he would have to tell her the whole truth on the following day.

CHAPTER III.

A RACECOURSE AND A CATHEDRAL.

Lady Croft was at this time a happier woman than she had been for years. Returning home, after a series of visits to kindred dowagers in other parts of England, she had been greeted on all sides with rumours which had caused her maternal heart to rejoice, and which had given her hope that her fondest projects were about to be realized. The poor lady's children had not hitherto been much of a comfort to her. Careful bringing up had not preserved them from ways that were wild, if not wicked, and direct influence over their conduct she well knew that she had none. On Florry's score there seemed to be more ground for disapproval than for positive alarm. Some day, no doubt, she would find a congenial husband—for although admirers of masculine women are not precisely plentiful, neither are they rare in these days—

and, once he was found, it would be his business to look after her. But that Freddy, so long as he remained a bachelor, must be surrounded by perils of the worst kind was only too obvious. Some kind friend had once said to Lady Croft, "That son of yours is born to be the prey of women. The chances are that he will end by marrying the housemaid;" and this careless and impertinent speech had haunted the anxious mother's memory long after it had been forgotten by its utterer. She did all that she could. Taking the warning in a literal sense, she actually issued instructions to the housekeeper that no woman-servant with any pretensions to good looks should be suffered to form one of the Croft Manor establishment. She ransacked Lynshire for a bride; she applied to all her friends to send her a girl—any girl of decent parentage—who might be willing and fitted to reign in her stead; and by a hundred transparent stratagems she strove to lure her son into the meshes. But all this had proved to be labour in vain. The young ladies, to be sure, had come forward in sufficiently large numbers; but Freddy had declined to be captivated by any of them. With some he had flirted; some he had ignored; but to none had he ever gone so far as to make serious pro-

posals; while, on the other hand, he had repeatedly frightened his mother out of her wits by advancing to the very brink of matrimony with some such wholly inadmissible person as Miss Lambert.

And now it was beginning to be whispered in the country that, after so many and great dangers, the waverer had chosen wisely and well, and that ere long Geneviève Gervis would be seen dispensing the hospitalities of Croft Manor. With her subdued, melancholy air, her craze for music, and her total ignorance of the ways of English country life, she was certainly not quite the sort of young lady whom nature would appear to have designed for the wife of a sporting baronet; but the old doctrine of the affinity of opposite temperaments came in appositely here, and it was agreed that if Sir Frederick had hitherto shown more liking for jollity than for refinement, some counteracting influence was precisely what he most needed. Moreover, added the gossips in their good-natured way, the girl was evidently much smitten with him, and would doubtless look leniently upon such of his peccadilloes as she might find herself unable to cure.

When these neighbourly comments and surmises reached Lady Croft's ears—as we may

be sure that they did directly after her return home—she could hardly contain herself for joy. Had she belonged to another branch of the Church Catholic, she would no doubt have relieved her feelings by holding out handsome conditional inducements to her patron saint. Being without such a heavenly confidant, she ordered her carriage, and drove into Beachborough to see Mrs. Knowles.

"So you have come to catechise me," said that outspoken lady. "The last time that you honoured me with a visit was rather more than a year ago, when you wanted to know whether your son was going to marry Nina Flemyng. I dare say you remember what I told you then."

"Oh, but I assure you, Mrs. Knowles, I have called upon you *very* often since that. You must have forgotten."

"Have you? Well, I was out, I suppose; or perhaps I didn't want to see you. At any rate, you will hardly deny that it is an errand of much the same kind that has brought you here now. And I can only give you the same answer: I don't know."

Lady Croft murmured something about Mrs. Knowles being such a great friend of the Gervises', about the suitability of the match, about her own maternal anxieties, and her

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strong impression that her son was "*really* in earnest" this time.

"Oh, well, if you ask me what I think," said Mrs. Knowles, whose opinion, by the way, had not been asked at all as yet, "I tell you plainly that I consider such a match anything but suitable. I won't say that the girl is too good for him; because I have always had a liking for your young scapegrace, as you know; but her standard is too high for him; and it is more than likely that, if they married now, he would break her heart before long. That's nothing to you, you'll say: so long as he gets a ladylike wife, who will behave herself properly and leave her neighbours' husbands alone, you care very little whether her heart be whole or broken. But I care a good deal, as it happens; and that is why I am not sorry that there is a fair prospect of a disappointment in store for you."

"Oh, *do* you think so?" Lady Croft was almost in tears. To be accused of being an accomplice in the prospective breaking of Geneviève's heart did not distress her much, recklessness in the matter of accusation being her old friend's prerogative; but that so shrewd an observer should throw doubts upon what everybody else had seemed to regard as next

door to a certainty was a heavy blow. "I had hoped so much that he was in earnest," she sighed.

"There are two or more parties to every bargain," Mrs. Knowles remarked drily.

"You surely cannot mean that she is trifling with him! Oh, that would be too—*horrid* of her! Mrs. Knowles, I *implore* you to conceal nothing from me. If I have been mistaken and misinformed, I would far rather be undeceived at once."

"I tell you I don't know anything at all about it. How is an old woman to fathom the deep ways of girls and boys who are always on their best behaviour before her? If I were in your place, and if I hadn't patience and common sense enough to stand aside and avoid meddling where I could do no good, I should go straight to head-quarters for the information I wanted. But, mind you, I don't advise your doing anything of the sort."

Never a word that falls from the lips of man or woman—so they say—but has its results, great or small, immediate or remote. To these guarded utterances on the part of Mrs. Knowles, for instance, was due the occurrence of a phenomenon unprecedented in the annals of Lynshire: the appearance, namely, of Lady

Croft's dark-green barouche upon the Lynchester race-course.

I hardly know why it is that the Lynchester autumn meeting has never met with much support at the hands of the local magnates. It is a decent, orderly meeting enough, attended by but few roughs and very few bookmakers; the horses belong for the most part to Lynshire owners, and six to four on the favourite is the usual state of the betting before each race. There is, therefore, little temptation or opportunity for the risking of fortunes on Higham Down; nor does there appear, upon the face of it, to be any reason why the ladies of the county should not grace the proceedings by their presence. But, whether it were owing to a vague impression of incongruity between the sound of cathedral-bells and the yells of betting-men, or to the influence of Lord Courtney, who has ever set his face against any commingling of the upper and middle classes, certain it is that a decree went forth long ago to the effect that it should not be "the thing" to be seen at Lynchester races; and as, in our part of the world, we do not violate established custom without some grave cause, the nobility and gentry of the neighbourhood, when they show themselves upon the course, usually leave their wives and daughters behind them.

It is true that there exist among us, as elsewhere, a few independent spirits who will not be bound by laws to which their reason refuses its assent. Miss Croft, for one, is always to be seen in a conspicuous place near the winning-post, and Nina Flemyng has upon more than one occasion been persuaded to bear her company, while there is generally a sprinkling of fair strangers ignorant of the unwritten laws of Lynshire. The Gervis family had hardly yet emerged from the latter category in the particular month of September with which we are now concerned, and consequently felt no hesitation in accepting Freddy Croft's offer to drive them over to Higham Down on his drag.

"We'll make up a regular jolly party," said that well-meaning young man confidentially to Mr. Gervis. "Miss Gervis will have the box-seat, of course—that is, if she will do me the honour to sit beside me; and Nina and my sister and Claud, you know, and a chap I've got staying with me, a real good sort, and the best hand at a coach-horn in Europe—that'll make six; and then there'll be old Flemyng for *you*; and Miss Potts—do you think Miss Potts would come? If she would, I might try and get Colonel Finch to talk to her—talk to anybody, old Finch would. I should say that

would be about enough. One doesn't want a crowd of outsiders, does one?"

"Certainly not," agreed Mr. Gervis gravely. "Your arrangements are perfect, and it is most thoughtful of you to have provided each of us with a suitable companion. Probably, however, you will have to eliminate Potts and partner. I can't answer for the effect that your seductive inducements may have upon her; but I doubt whether her sense of decorum will permit of her scrambling up on to the roof of a coach."

And in truth Miss Potts, on being informed of the proposed expedition, gratefully but firmly declined to join in it, excusing herself upon the plea of uncertain nerves and an invincible terror of sitting behind four horses, however skilfully driven. But the remainder of the party was made up without any occasion for entreaties, and it is to be hoped that the several couples so judiciously selected enjoyed themselves, each after their own fashion, during the long drive.

The occupant of the box-seat was assuredly not the least contented of the coach-load. Often, in other and less joyous days, Geneviève looked back upon that excursion to Lynchester races as one of the brightest episodes of a time in which all things had been bright. The

exhilarating influences attendant upon coaching are so widely known and appreciated in these days that it is needless to insist upon the natural excitement of one who found herself for the first time under their spell; but as charm of landscape has a good deal to say to the true enjoyment of all out-door pursuits—as fishermen cast their flies with an additional zest under the shadow of the wild mountains of Norway or in solemn Canadian solitudes—as the sportsman rejoices in the purple moorland and the flying lights and shades upon the distant hills—so the delight of sitting behind four well-broken horses may be greatly enhanced if pleasant scenery lie on either side of the way; and Geneviève confidently avers to this present day that the fourteen miles of high-road which separate Southlands from Lynchester are without their equals in England for beauty and variety of the cheerful, rural order.

The heavy drag rolled on swiftly, up hill and down dale, now thundering through a straggling village, where children ran out, with their fingers in their mouths, to stare at the quality, while their mothers curtsied from the doorways; now skirting woods upon which autumn had already laid touches of yellow, russet and brown; sometimes crossing a gorse-covered

common, or "minnis," as we should say in our parts, whence the towers of Lynchester cathedral could be distinguished far below in the one direction and white sails against the horizon-line in the other; sometimes descending again into a deep hollow, where there would be pretty sure to be sand-pits and flights of little martins darting hither and thither about their rocky nests. All the land had that aspect of drowsy well-being which is the property of England and autumn; the grey old churches, clothed in ivy and flanked by yew-trees, and the thatched farm-buildings among their stacks, seemed sleeping in mellow sunlight, as if such were their normal condition, and they knew nothing of the bleak winter gales. But there was no lack of life, human and other, about. Waggons, laden with the riches of an abundant harvest, drew up to let Sir Frederick go by; farmers, taking their good ladies in gigs to see the horse-racing, touched their hats, and were saluted in return by the prescribed lifting of the driver's elbow; every now and again a covey of partridges whirred up out of the turnips; and once, from the edge of a marsh, a snipe rose suddenly—whizz, whizz! right and left, and then away like an arrow.

It is in truth a pleasant, homely country, and not by me, who know and love every acre of it, shall its merits be disparaged; but I can't but suspect that, if Geneviève's way had lain across Essex flats or through the infernal regions of the black country, she would have conceived a speedy admiration for those dreary landscapes. For the axiom we started with is, after all, a two-edged one, and if Nature flatters happiness, happiness, I suppose is not slow to return the compliment, and will have it that all nature must be beautiful. And Geneviève was at this time happier than she had ever been before in her life. It is needless to add that she was unaware of any special reason for her being so, or, for that matter, of her being so at all; for when reflections such as these begin to thrust themselves forward the subject of them is apt to vanish mighty quickly. It was enough for Geneviève, on that sunny autumn morning, to feel that life was sweet, and that somebody close at hand cared for her more than conventionality allowed him to say. She did not tell herself that Freddy was in love with her—I fancy that some women shrink from putting such thoughts into so many words, even long after the truth has become clear to them—but how could she help noticing the

deferential tone which he always adopted in addressing her? Or could she fail to observe what pains he took to gratify every whim of hers, and how he remembered careless words and hints that had fallen from her weeks before? The key-note of the girl's character was an intense and almost morbid desire to be loved; and I am not prepared to say that any skilful man would have had much difficulty in making himself loved by her. Freddy was not exactly skilful; but he was certainly dangerous. He was kind and merry and had quick sympathies, and when his frank blue eyes met Geneviève's, she felt that she was looking into the face of an honest man, who would not know how to tell a lie, and who would stick to his friends through good report and evil report. And perhaps, in the main, she read him rightly.

Freddy's tongue, always an active member, had little rest between Southlands and the race-course. He gave his neighbour some elementary instruction in the art of driving four-in-hand; he told her the names and pedigrees of his horses; he pointed out where the houses of his various acquaintances stood, and had some queer anecdote to relate or terse description to give of each and all of their owners;

and Geneviève listened, speaking seldom herself, laughing sometimes, and quietly enjoying it all. Behind her, Miss Croft and her attendant swain were entertaining one another uproariously; Claud and Nina were, as usual, conversing in soft undertones; and from time to time, dominating all other sounds, came fragments of didactic utterances—"The scientific basis of morality must be sought for in the evolution of conduct. . . . A right understanding of the relation of causes to effects renders all revealed religion superfluous. . . . Sin will cease when man shall have discovered that sin is essentially fatal to happiness," etc., etc.—showing that Mr. Flemyng had been fuddling his brains with a superficial study of Mr. Herbert Spencer.

The course was reached only too soon. Freddy steered his coach very neatly through the crowd of vehicles which were already gathered together upon the turf, and drew up in the place which had been reserved for him.

"I say, I'm not going to sit here all day, you know," Miss Croft announced immediately. "Come along, Nina, and let's have a look at them in the paddock. I'll tell you what to back as soon as I've seen them. Now then; catch me, somebody; I'm going overboard!"

And with a scramble and a jump, Miss Croft reached the ground. Nina followed her in a more leisurely and graceful fashion; and then Freddy said—

"We might as well go too, mightn't we, Miss Gervis? There's a good half-hour to be got through before the next race, and we can take a walk round without being hustled, or anything. We ain't an over showy lot to look at down here; but our manners are quite up to the mark, I promise you."

Geneviève nodded assent. Like the proverbial British soldier, she was ready to go anywhere and do anything—ready, also, to be pleased with everything. Into the paddock she did not go, Freddy being unwilling to let her approach so closely to the horses' heels—though, to be sure, he had seen his sister and Miss Flemyng adventure themselves into that dangerous proximity without a tremor—but she was taken to look at the man who swallowed blazing tow and broke stones on his head, at the country-people solemnly revolving in a merry-go-round to the strains of a wheezy barrel-organ, at the knock-'em-downs and the shooting-galleries and the other common accompaniments of English racing; and with all these remarkable sights she was pleased to

declare herself much entertained. Even Higham Down came in for a share of her praise; and, indeed, with its crowd of gaily dressed holiday-makers, its brass bands and tents and fluttering flags, and its far-stretching prospect of autumn woods, fields, and blue distances, that ordinarily bleak district seemed to have assumed a smile to welcome the stranger. And then the racing itself. Longchamps could show nothing more attractive, Geneviève thought. There, as here, there were weedy-looking horses, tiny jockeys in silk jackets, false starts, exciting finishes; and if the quality of the sport were a trifle inferior in the present case, the enjoyment of the uninitiated was certainly not affected thereby.

After a time hampers were unpacked, pies and mayonnaises and other good things made their appearance upon the roof of the drag, corks were drawn, conversation grew louder and laughter more hearty, and soon everybody began to show an inclination to view the world in as rosy a light as did Geneviève herself. Mr. Flemyng, in particular, rising to the level of the occasion under the influence of sunshine and champagne, delivered himself of an eloquent panegyric upon the English thoroughbred, tracing the pedigree of that noble animal

up to his Arab ancestors, dwelling in glowing language upon his speed, courage, and endurance, and committing himself to such extraordinary statements with reference to the process of his training that the three younger men of the party had much ado to repress an unseemly outburst of mirth. The yokels who slouched by, with their hands in their pockets, stared up open-mouthed at the flushed and grey-haired orator overhead; Nina looked a little uneasy, Miss Croft contemptuous, while Mr. Gervis, with his head on one side, appeared to be calculating how much longer his venerable friend would be allowed to shout without the intervention of the police. But Mr. Flemyng neither saw nor heeded any of these things. Toasts, he said, were, he was aware, somewhat out of date; but on an occasion like the present, when they were surrounded, as it were, by patrons of the turf, when they saw about them evidences of the interest taken in their own country in that—er—er—grand institution, and when they were partaking of the hospitality—he would say the generous hospitality—of—er—er—in short, of a patron of the turf, he could not refrain from proposing one toast, which he was sure would be received with the enthusiasm which it

merited. He meant, "Success to horse-racing."

It was at this convivial moment that Freddy startled everybody by dropping his glass and exclaiming in a loud voice, "Good Lord deliver us!"

"What *is* the matter?" asked Nina, who had been put a little out of humour by her father's exhibition, and who hated being startled.

"Oh, nothing," answered Freddy; "only the world has come to an end, I expect, and my mother has driven over to announce it. Oh, there's no doubt about it; it's my mother, fast enough; and I give you my word I should as soon have thought of seeing the Archbishop of Canterbury at Lynchester races."

Lady Croft, making her way, attended by a bewildered footman, through the crowd that surrounded her son's drag, was probably as conscious of being out of her proper place as any one could have wished her to be; but it is notorious that the timidest things in creation will grow bold when under the sway of maternal instinct; and this fond mother happened, as we have seen, to be harassed by anxieties which it would have taken something more formidable than the jostling of tag, rag and bobtail to keep

her from seizing the first favourable occasion of allaying.

"I have come to carry you away," she said, smiling up at Geneviève, after she had bowed graciously to each member of the little party on the top of the drag. "You were saying, the other day, that you would like so much to hear the cathedral service; and as I had to drive into Lynchester this afternoon, and knew you were here, I thought it would be such a good opportunity—especially as it seems that they are going to have a *particularly* lovely anthem. You know, it is Saint—Saint—well, Saint *Somebody's* day. We shall be just in time, if we start at once; and the Dean has very kindly promised to have stalls kept for us."

"But Lord bless my soul, mother!" exclaimed Freddy, aghast, "Miss Gervis is out for a day's racing; she don't want to go to church."

"My *dear* boy, *don't* you think Miss Gervis may have had enough of this dreadful noise and bustle? You forget that her tastes are not *quite* the same as yours. Now, Miss Gervis, would you not a great deal rather listen to some beautiful music for half an hour than stay where you are? I am quite *sure* you would."

Geneviève, perhaps, was not equally positive; but what could she do?

"It is very kind of you to have taken so much trouble," she said, preparing to descend from her high position, without directly answering the question.

"Not at all—only too *delighted!*" returned Lady Croft, triumphing. And then, thinking that a word of consolation might properly be thrown to Freddy—"I shall bring her back long before it is time for you to start," she added encouragingly; and so departed, bearing off the prize.

Geneviève, accustomed all her life long to submit to the caprices of others, allowed herself to be driven away in Lady Croft's carriage without a murmur. She could not, however, help regretting her curtailed holiday a little; nor did the cathedral music prove to be by any means worthy of the sacrifice which she had made for the sake of it. That saint whose name Lady Croft had failed to remember must, if he had any existence at all, have been only a black-letter worthy; for there was neither opening nor concluding voluntary, as there would have been, had the day been a festival of the Church, and the minor canon who gabbled through the service, like a clerk reciting a legal document, appeared to be in one mind with the choir as to the desirability of getting the business over as soon as might be.

There was but a scanty congregation present, consisting for the most part of old ladies—wives, probably, of the cathedral dignitaries—who occupied stalls here and there, and repeated the responses in their quavering voices. From a great wheel-window in the south transept long rays of blue and crimson and golden sunlight streamed down upon clustered pillars and carved oak, upon marble flags and ancient brasses, upon the old ladies' bonnets, and the white surplices of the choristers, and the vergers in their stuff gowns, and the bald head of Mr. Dean, who was well stricken in years and had dropped asleep on his knees. They seemed to fall like a benediction from Heaven, Geneviève fancied—those rainbow tints which had shed their soft brilliance upon so many generations of dead and forgotten worshippers, and which would illumine the children's children of those who now claimed a brief right to kneel in Lynchester cathedral. Those old canons and their wives must have an easy, happy time of it, she thought—a peaceful evening of life, dwelling in their dim, spacious houses under the shadow of the cathedral towers, toddling in to the daily services, waiting quietly for the end in an atmosphere of solemnity and beauty and rest. Surely the

vulgar cares and worries of this world could never penetrate into those cloistered recesses or obtrude themselves upon the dignified repose of those trim lawns and walled gardens. And then she began to wonder what it would be like to be quite, quite old, and whether, supposing she had reached a patriarchal age, she would like to be the wife of a pillar of the Church. From which point she allowed her mind to wander off into a variety of vague speculations, instead of saying her prayers, as she ought to have been doing.

Lady Croft was more devout. She remained kneeling for some time after the little procession of clergy and lay-clerks had passed, with echoing footsteps, down the nave; and who knows whether, if Geneviève could have overheard her neighbour's petitions, she might not have been startled by the sound of her own name occurring in them? For Lady Croft, good soul, had kept unimpaired the religious beliefs which she had learnt as a child, and now, in her old age, asked quite simply for what she wanted, just as, fifty odd years before, she had prayed for fine weather, or a new doll, or what not. The special intervention of Providence seemed requisite to the attainment of the end which, at that moment, she had chiefly in view; but

something might certainly be accomplished by human effort, and she was determined that she would at all events discover within the next quarter of an hour whether there were any ground for the disquieting hints thrown out by Mrs. Knowles.

The dean in his surplice joined the two ladies as soon as they had emerged into the cloisters, and suggested tea at the deanery and a subsequent examination of the cathredral and its ancient monuments ; but Lady Croft declined both offers with many thanks. The carriage was waiting, she said, and her young friend had an appointment out in the country to keep presently. (She did not think it necessary to mention that the appointment was at Higham Down.) They would only just take a turn round the cloisters before starting. Some other day she hoped to have the pleasure of calling upon Mrs.—Mrs.— The old gentleman said his wife would always be delighted to see Lady Croft, and soon took his leave—not unwillingly perhaps.

The time was getting short, and Lady Croft could not afford to waste any more of it. She made Geneviève sit down beside her on a stone bench, in front of which was a grass-plot, shut in by broken arches and ivy-grown ruins, and opened the attack.

"I am so *glad* I thought of bringing you here this afternoon," she began. "The music was not *quite* as good as usual, and I suppose they must have changed the anthem for some reason or other; still, it was worth while coming was it not?—and *so* much nicer than spending the whole day on that horrid race-course. And it has been such a pleasure to me to meet you again. I was in hopes that I should have seen you, the other day, when I called; but you were out."

Geneviève said she had been very sorry.

"Oh, so was I. I was *dreadfully* disappointed. I very seldom care to make new acquaintances now; but *you*, of course, are such an acquisition to the neighbourhood; and if I had not been away from home, I should have hoped to see a great deal of you all," said Lady Croft, very graciously. "I have *heard* of you, though, constantly from my son," she continued, "and of all your kindness to him. You don't know what a relief it is to my mind to think that he has friends like you within reach. Poor boy! I cannot help feeling anxious about him sometimes. He is so warm-hearted and unsuspecting; and staying in all kinds of houses, as he does, there are constant risks for him which *I* see, though he cannot. The girls

of the present day seem to me to be a different race from what we were. We used to consider the name of a flirt a reproach; they, I believe, absolutely glory in it. I hope, my dear child, that *you* never flirt."

Lady Croft turned her head round, and looked inquiringly into her hearer's face, as she delivered this shot; but if she expected to see an ingenuous blush there, she was disappointed. The daughter of Vincent Gervis and the Marchesa Santinetti had inherited a constitution free from such distressing tendencies, and would not have been put out of countenance even if her ladyship's thrust had struck home.

"Oh no," she answered, laughing a little. "But you were speaking about your son."

"Yes. I am afraid for him. He is as true as steel himself; he does not understand what is called flirtation" (Oh, Lady Croft!) "and there are many girls, unfortunately, who take a delight in making men fond of them, while they themselves are thinking of nothing but their own amusement. I think that is so unwomanly and *wrong*, don't you?"

"Do you mean Miss Lambert?" Geneviève asked.

"That horrid *common* girl? Oh *dear* no! there never was the least danger there. Freddy

would not have *thought* of such a thing; his taste is too good for that. No; what I mean is that there are others—persons of his position, you understand—who give me the idea of being nice and suitable, and who are ready to encourage him, without perhaps seriously reflecting upon what they are doing."

"So that the wrong people want to marry him, and the right people don't. That is very unlucky," said Geneviève gravely.

This was not exactly the impression which Lady Croft had intended to convey. She shifted her ground a little.

"There are so very few right people at all," she sighed; "that is the worst of it. And if you knew my son as well as I do, you would see how absolutely *essential* it is that he should marry someone who would be really the right person for him."

"Some one of a cheerful disposition?" suggested Geneviève, for want of any better remark.

Lady Croft demurred. "Well; not so much that. Of course he would not like his wife to be dull or moping."

"I don't think she would have the chance," observed Geneviève, smiling.

"No; perhaps not. But that was not what

I had in my mind. The truth is that Freddy will be what his wife may choose, or be able, to make him. Some men are like that, you know: the Crofts have always been so; it is in the blood. And so many of them have gone wrong, and are spoken of now as having been bad men, when in reality they were not that at all, but only thoughtless and high-spirited; and the fault has been with the women of their family, who have been timid, or selfish, or somehow unable to influence them. I often think that, when the time comes for us all to give an account of our lives, we shall find that we are answerable for many sins of others which we might have prevented, if we had used our opportunities rightly."

Lady Croft paused. She had spoken the last few words in a quiet voice, without any of her usual exaggerated emphasis, and there were tears in her eyes when she ceased. If half of what one has heard about the late Sir Montagu be true, it is very unlikely that any female influence could have perceptibly retarded his progress to the deuce; but then what one hears of one's neighbours very seldom is true; and doubtless this poor, weak, well-intentioned lady had a store of faded old memories in the light of which her husband would appear, not as a

tipsy bully, but as a gallant young suitor protesting life-long fidelity to the object of his vows. I have been told that theirs was a love-match, and that, when they came home after the wedding, they were admitted on all hands to be the handsomest couple in the county.

"And so," resumed the widow presently, "you see it is not everybody whom I should care to welcome as Freddy's wife. I know quite well what the girl whom he ought to marry should be like. She should be quiet and cultivated in her tastes; she should be fond of music, because that is a passion of his; she should be ready to sympathize in his amusements, without actually joining in all of them; for, if she did, she might lower herself in his esteem. If possible, she should always hold herself the least bit in the world above him; and a certain amount of decision she *must* have. Such a wife as that would make him happy all his life long; and I *know* that he would make her happy too."

How could Geneviève help recognizing the person intended to be portrayed in this distinct sketch? The inference was flattering, but embarrassing, and it was difficult to see what answer could be made, or was expected to be made, to such general observations. And then

on a sudden, as she sat silent there, poking the point of her parasol between the chinks of the flagged pavement, she found herself being warmly embraced.

After that, Lady Croft had the grace and the sense not to say any more. On the way back to the race-course she discoursed with much vivacity upon various topics, but did not again allude to her son's destinies. She was at ease in her mind, feeling that the object of her excursion had been attained, and that it now only remained for Freddy to make the needful avowal of his love. And yet Geneviève had neither said nor done anything to warrant so hasty a leap to conclusions, except that she had allowed herself to be kissed—which, to be sure, she could hardly have helped.

Freddy had a somewhat silent and absent neighbour on the box-seat, as he drove homewards. This, however, did not so much signify, as he himself had a great deal to relate and talk about; and while seven tongues were keeping up an incessant accompaniment to the clatter of the horses' hoofs and the rumbling of the wheels, the inactivity of the eighth was fortunate enough to escape notice. Mr. Flemyng, who had been assuaging his thirst with more champagne during the afternoon, had harked

back to the subject of his morning's discourse, and was laying down an authoritative scheme of ethics, in the course of which sundry hard words, such as transcendentalism, pseudo-materialism and the like, lost a syllable here and there.

"No such thing as crime!" cried he, with a wave of his hand, apropos of the county gaol, which somebody pointed out in the distance. "No such thing as crime! Mis-directed energy —merely misd'rect' energy!"

To one listener this indistinct philosophic utterance sounded almost like an echo of the theory which she had just heard broached with reference to the Croft family, whose energies, it appeared, had taken a wrong direction for the want of a guiding hand at once gentle and firm. Was it her mission to supply this deficiency in the case of the present head of the house? Had she it in her power to do so? And was good-humoured, unromantic little Freddy indeed the man to whom she could consecrate her love and her life, and, forsaking all other, hold herself till death should them part?

These questions, and sundry others, our heroine may have debated, as the twilight deepened and the woods grew dim, and the

hedge-rows and houses flitted past her half-conscious eyes. But she probably perceived that, if she could answer the last of them in the affirmative, the remainder might be allowed to take their chance.

CHAPTER IV.

FRIENDLY WARNINGS.

I HAVE not at any time been tempted to invest a portion of my limited capital in unlimited concerns; but I can well imagine that, if I had done so, and that if my choice had fallen, say, upon the Glasgow Bank—as, of course, it would have done; for nobody ever had such luck as I have—I can well imagine, I say, that when the fatal hour struck, and the papers brought me the announcement of my ruin, I should not have been acquainted with all its details for more than an hour or so before at least half a dozen kind friends would have hastened in, with the *Times* in their hands, to break the news to me. The world is full of such well-meaning folks—people who will insist upon reading out to you from the *Illustrated London News* the provisions of your late uncle's will, in which, unhappily, your name does not figure;

or who, after you have been holding wet blankets in front of your fire-place for half an hour and have collected your valuables and despatched a messenger in hot haste for the parish engine, will send round a footman with Mr. Brown's compliments, and is Mr. Jones aware that his chimbley is afire? I am even acquainted with certain persons who will not suffer one of my periodical liver-attacks to pass without letting me know, in commiserating accents, that I am looking far from well; which surely is much as though they should tell me that I have a nose upon my face.

It was, therefore, only to be expected that, with two love affairs going on under his very eyes, Mr. Gervis should have had no lack of informants who felt it right to warn him of the turn matters were taking. Not to mention a succession of agitated missives bearing the Trouville post-mark, which, in accordance with his unvarying custom, he left unanswered, he was favoured from all sides with verbal communications the purport of which was that the future both of his son and his daughter was in danger of becoming compromised, that Freddy Croft was a libertine, and Nina Flemyng, to say the least of it, a flirt. Admiral Bagshawe, meeting the owner of Southlands at the club,

took occasion to speak a few neighbourly words to this effect in his blunt, straightforward way; Miss Pennefather, sustained by a sense of duty, overcame her maiden modesty so far as to recount some episodes in the domestic history of Croft Manor and the Moated House; Mrs. This, Mrs. That, and Lady T'other followed suit; and, one fine afternoon, who should come driving up in a mail phæton, bent upon the same charitable errand, but the lord-lieutenant of the county *in propriâ personâ?*

Mr. Gervis happened to be sauntering alone among his garden walks when this portent became visible; and Lord Courtney, catching sight of him, pulled up, and handed the reins to his groom.

"How are you, Gervis? how are you?" said he, as he descended slowly to the ground.

There was a time when Lord Courtney was a great dandy, and wore the smallest patent-leather boots that ever were seen; but the gout has long since forced him to discard these vanities, just as years have robbed him of his formerly slim figure. He is still, however, a carefully dressed man. On the present occasion he wore a grey frock-coat and trousers, and had a pale yellow rose in his button hole. His tall white hat was, as usual, tilted slightly forwards,

so that he had to throw back his head and lower his eyelids in order to see any object in front of him—a detail which was not without influence upon the majesty of his carriage.

"Taking your afternoon stroll?" he asked affably. "If you will allow me, I will join you. Charming place you have here, Gervis—charming, upon my word!"

Mr. Gervis said it was pretty, no doubt; but it was getting horribly damp and cold in the mornings and evenings.

"Ah, well, yes—I dare say. You must expect heavy dews at this season of the year. But your position is good. I wish my house stood as well. And how do you like Lynshire? Find it a little dull perhaps? Yes; a man accustomed to society, like yourself, naturally would. But, as counties go, it is well enough—sociable, you know; and the properties don't change hands much; which is the great thing. Lady Courtney would have done herself the pleasure of calling upon the Princess Ouranoff; but she is a sad invalid, as you know; and it is rather a long drive from us to you. Somebody told me, too, that the Princess and your daughter were only to be in England for another week or so."

"The Princess has been at Trouville these

two months," answered Mr. Gervis; "my daughter is still with me."

"Ah, yes; so I have understood. And I must congratulate you upon being the father of so attractive a young lady as everybody declares her to be. Some day I shall hope to have the honour of being presented to her."

I believe that at court, where he has more than once held high offices, Lord Courtney has the reputation of being a man of singularly distinguished and agreeable manners. It is certain that he can make himself very pleasant when he chooses—which, to be sure, is not every day—and he was pleased to do so now. Suiting his conversation, as he thought, to his company, he soon quitted local subjects for the wider field of European politics, with regard to which he represented himself as occupying the position of a well-informed spectator. His manner implied that he looked upon Gervis as being in some sort *du métier*, and he concealed from him neither the contents of a letter which he had received from the Prime Minister only the day before, nor the French ambassador's significant remark, as he stepped on board the steamer at Dover, on his way to take a month's leave of absence, nor certain rumours which had lately been wafted over from Berlin. As to the

secret understanding of two celebrated Chancellors he felt bound to maintain a discreet reserve; but he allowed sundry hints to escape from him which, if rightly taken, might well serve as a basis for prophecy of coming events; and if in truth he knew very little more of these matters than you or I, and if he altogether failed to impose upon the veteran diplomatist who listened to him so deferentially, his intentions were none the less excellent for that.

Not until he had paced up and down the gravel walks for the best part of an hour, and, after consulting his watch, had declared that he must really be going, did he touch upon the genuine object of his visit; and this he introduced airily, as a sort of afterthought. By the way, Lady Courtney had mentioned to him some foolish gossip which he sincerely hoped had no substratum of truth in it. And then he proceeded to repeat what was being commonly said in the county.

"I make it a rule never to interfere in the affairs of my neighbours: in fact I do not—ah—care to do so, as a general thing," concluded Lord Courtney, seeming to imply that the affairs of his neighbours were really a great deal too far beneath him to merit notice.

"With all the cares of your lord-lieutenancy

upon your shoulders, you cannot be expected to find time for that amiable occupation," remarked Mr. Gervis.

"Well, no. But something is due to an old friend; and I have thought it well to—ah—put you upon your guard."

"I cannot sufficiently express my thanks."

"Not at all! I beg you won't mention it. I shall be only too glad if a few words from me should prove of service to you; and bystanders, you know, proverbially see most of the game. With regard to these—ah—Flemyngs I cannot say much. I am not personally acquainted with them; but I have told you what people say of the girl, and in any case, I presume that you would hardly wish your boy to be entrapped into a hasty marriage at his age. Young Croft I do know; and I am sorry to have to add that I have the worst possible opinion of him. I should not envy the lot of any lady who should be condemned to live in such a—a—what shall I say?—such a den of wild beasts as Croft Manor. It occurred to me that, having been as long absent from England as you have, you might be under some misapprehension as to his status in the county—that you might imagine him a man of position, or likely to become so. I can assure you that he has not the slightest

chance of ever being anything of the kind. He has, of course, certain advantages of birth and fortune; but he has not chosen to use them, and they are not conspicuous enough to entitle him of themselves to a place in society. He is an impudent young dog, with a taste for low company now, and he will probably proceed, through the usual stages, to become a ruined drunkard, as his father was before him. Were I in your place, I should forbid him my house before the mischief reached a head. Well, good-bye, Gervis: glad to have seen you. I need not say that I do not wish what I have mentioned to you to go any further."

"I fully understand and respect your feelings," replied Gervis. "The responsibilities of a father are very heavy, and if one were not cheered occasionally by some such proofs of disinterested friendship as you have shown me this afternoon, I hardly know how one could bear up under them. My compliments to Lady Courtney, and many thanks for your valuable hints. Good-bye. Go away, you unspeakable booby, and for the love of heaven, don't come back again: you are the least amusing of all the blockheads I have encountered hereabouts."

The concluding words, it is needless to say,

were uttered after Lord Courtney had climbed into his mail-phaeton again, and it is to be hoped that that benevolent nobleman drove away under the impression that his unselfishness in discharging an irksome duty had been properly appreciated.

"A friend, or rather an enemy of yours, Lord Courtney, was here to-day," Mr. Gervis remarked casually to Freddy Croft that same evening. "How have you managed to offend him so deeply?"

"I suppose it must be that ducking he got with the fire-hose," said Freddy pensively. "I told Lynchester at the time that he wouldn't like it. He has hated me like poison ever since, and I'm sorry for it, because he's a good sort of old boy, in spite of his pomposity, and he subcribes handsomely to the hounds, though he don't often come out himself. Poor old Courtney! He isn't a bad-hearted old chap, you know."

"He said you were an impudent young dog, with a taste for low company."

"Did he really?"

"He really did. And the worst of it is that it's true," said Gervis, who had from the first had a sneaking fondness for his good-humoured little neighbour, and was in the habit of ad-

dressing him in a tone of familiarity wholly unknown to many of his older friends.

"Well, I don't know what you call low company," returned Freddy. "I'm more at Southlands than anywhere else, at all events."

Whereat Mr. Gervis gave a short laugh, and rang the bell for another bottle of the claret which his guest specially affected. Freddy's private opinion was that, when the time should come for him to solicit that embarrassing interview which all men, save such as have the luck to espouse orphans, must face sooner or later, he would be met in no very austere spirit by his future father-in law.

Such was, indeed, the almost unanimous conviction of those who felt an interest in the fortunes of Freddy and Geneviève. Miss Potts alone, in a silent minority of one, thought differently. Her mental attitude with regard to her employer was one of unalterable distrust, and she knew that he was never more dangerous than when he was outwardly most complaisant. One other feature of his character, which in any one else might have taken rank as a virtue, but in him could only be counted as a far-seeing sense of expediency, she had observed : namely, that he was in all things a man of his word. If, as Varinka vehemently

asserted, he had bound himself to allow his daughter to enter into no matrimonial engagement during her stay in England, then the sooner Sir Frederick knew the worst the better, for his fate was sealed. Miss Potts, therefore, was ill at ease, and would have given the half of that snug little sum which years of economy had enabled her to lay by, if, by so doing, she could have averted the impending sword from her dear pupil's head. *Non Siculæ dapes, non avium citharæve cantus*—not those frequent dinners, at which Mr. Flemyng enjoyed himself so hugely and the laughter of the young folks was so loud ; not the plaintive thrilling of the violin on soft autumn evenings, could lull Miss Potts's fears to rest, or raise her drooping spirits. Sometimes she would fix a piteous interrogating glance upon Geneviève, but as the latter volunteered no confidences, it was not for her to suggest or caution ; so she held her peace, contenting herself with praying, night and morning, for the triumph of the righteous and the discomfiture of the wicked, and inwardly attaching a specific application to her petition which her idea of Christian charity forbade her to state in plain terms.

Autumn was now stealing on apace, and the day following that of Lord Courtney's friendly

mission proved dull, damp, and foggy. Towards afternoon Mr. Gervis, who had a touch of rheumatism and had been vainly trying, all day, to find some place near the library fire free from piercing draughts, grew restless, and, donning a fur-lined coat, had himself driven down to Beachborough to call upon his old friend Mrs. Knowles. He had of late fallen into the habit of occasionally dropping in towards five o'clock to beg for a cup of tea in South Crescent, where he knew that he could count upon a welcome, and possibly also upon a little of that tacit sympathy for which even the hardest-hearted of men must sometimes experience a craving. These two people, so dissimilar in tastes, opinions, and ways of life, were yet mutually attached. Each had soon recognized in the other a fund of sagacity enlivened by a keen sense of the drier kind of humour; each found the other an amusing study. They understood one another, or at least fancied they did so; which, for all ordinary purposes, is much the same thing. But there was a stronger link than any of these between them in the common memory of a far-away time when George III. had only just ceased to reign, and railways were not, and the Knowleses of Stone Hall used to drive up to

London once in every two years or so, in a heavy carriage drawn by four post-horses—of a merry little society whose members, for the most part, had been gathered to their fathers many years back—of who knows what foolish old jokes and quarrels and reconciliations and forgotten scandals? These two, then, would have become cronies for old sake's sake, if for no other reason; nor was the harmony of their relations likely to be interrupted, during the remainder of their earthly course, either by diversity of opinion or the amiable calumny of friends, or indeed by anything, unless perhaps, for a time, by some freak on the part of the lady, whose temper has ever been counted a trifle uncertain.

Possibly Mrs. Knowles may herself have been suffering from some one of the aches and pains incidental to advanced years when Gervis came shivering into her drawing-room to bemoan his rheumatism; for it was clear that something had ruffled her; and instead of condoling with her visitor, she merely threw up her head and snorted, after a fashion that she has when the weaknesses of her fellow-mortals are more than usually apparent to her.

"Serve you right!" quoth she, unfeelingly. "Rheumatism indeed! I should think so,

when you take no healthy exercise, and go about with a thing like that" (pointing with supreme contempt at Mr. Gervis's sable-lined coat) "on your shoulders! How much younger are you than I? Ten years?—fifteen years? Yes, I must be fifteen years your senior, if I am a day, and yet I believe I could make a better bargain with an insurance company than you could. You don't see me lolling about in arm-chairs, and, please God, you never will. I have no patience with people who wear out their constitutions when they are young, and then grumble because they are good for nothing at three score years and ten."

"Ah, there at least I have the advantage of you," remarked Gervis, placidly. "I have an abundance of patience, if I have nothing else. And that is very fortunate, because all you good people hereabouts seem determined to give me every opportunity of exercising it. For the rest, I fully admit your superiority to me, both in body and mind. I am a mere wreck."

"Hum! I shall not contradict you. You have only yourself to thank. If you had led a decent, respectable life, as an English gentleman should, you would have been able to enjoy a day's shooting or a gallop after the hounds

now as well as anybody. As it is, I believe you enjoy nothing."

"Except a cup of your tea and your conversation; and they are both so excellent, you know. You are already favouring me with a delightful sample of the one; might I be made quite happy with a little of the other?"

"Oh yes, you shall have your tea," answered Mrs. Knowles, ringing the bell, "It is a poor sort of drink for a man; but there!—I dare say it keeps you from worse habits. You were saying that somebody had been trying your patience."

"Not somebody; everybody. Or rather they have all been endeavouring to do so. It is true that they have not met with much success; but that is only because I happen to be protected by an armour of indifference which I will modestly defy any one's impertinence to pierce. An ordinary man might certainly find it rather surprising that everybody within a radius of fifteen miles or so should assume the right to lecture him and offer him advice upon his domestic affairs."

Mrs. Knowles said, "Not at all surprising. Were people to let a man fall asleep, and drive into a morass, without shouting to him?"

Mr. Gervis replied that a man who was

driving his own horses in his own way, and was not at all asleep, would be justified in turning round and swearing at any fool who made him jump by yelling after him.

"Maybe so," said Mrs. Knowles in a determined voice; "but you are not going to put me off like that, let me tell you. What do you propose to do with that boy of yours? Answer me that."

"I propose," answered Gervis slowly, "to do nothing with him. I propose, within certain limits, to let him do what he likes with himself. He is of age."

"So the blind man's parents in the Gospel said, when they wanted to shirk responsibility. The truth is, Vincent Gervis, that you have been a selfish man all your life, and soon you will reap the crop you have sown, as it is just and proper that you should. I say nothing about your daughter; because you could not be expected to know how to bring up a girl, and you have very judiciously left her in the hands of that worthy old Potts, who does know. Moreover, I have a notion that her will is as strong as yours, and that she will choose her husband for herself, when the time comes, whether you like it or whether you don't. But I tell you plainly that you have

not done your duty by Claud. You want a companion forsooth to sail with you to Hong-kong or Yokohama, or some such heathenish places, and so you take the lad away from school at the most critical time of his life; you interrupt his education; you stuff his head full of cynical maxims and show him the world before he can understand it; and finally you cast him loose, without a profession or occupation of any sort or kind to scare the devil away with. I should like to know what you think will become of him. If he does not go to the bad, it will be no thanks to you, my friend. You have been kind to him after a fashion, because, I suppose, you happened to get on well together; but in my opinion he owes you nothing: and if you expect him to honour his father, you are expecting too much, and will in all probability be disappointed."

"I am not so unreasonable," answered Gervis, sipping his tea. "Your description of me, my dear Mrs. Knowles, is delightfully accurate; and I am sure you will be pleased to hear that I have not a word to say for myself. I suppose nothing can be more certain than that I ought to have put Claud into some profession. I have no objection,

however, to telling you as an old friend, how it was that I came to remove him from Eton. I was under the impression at the time that I should not live through another year. My doctor gave me to understand as much, and I naturally supposed that he knew what he was talking about. Under the circumstances, I thought it advisable that Claud should see something of the world (I did not take him to Yokohama by-the-by) before finding himself burdened with a considerable fortune, and other cares which I need not enter upon. I feel that I owe him an apology for surviving; and, what with rheumatism and one thing and another, this world is really not such an abode of bliss that I should be very reluctant to leave it. But it is not my fault that I am still here, is it?"

"Well, no," answered Mrs. Knowles, somewhat mollified. "And I am sure I hope you have a long lease of life yet to run. But all this must have been a good five years ago."

"Quite so. I understand what you mean; and I plead guilty. However, what is done is done. I can't put him into a cavalry regiment now; and, as a *pis-aller*, I intend, as I said before, to let him follow his own devices. Also, as I said before, within certain limits.

Can you suggest any improvement upon that design?"

Mrs. Knowles rubbed her chin. "I don't know that I can. The question is, what are his devices, and what do you mean by certain limits?"

Mr. Gervis laid his head on one side, and smiled, without replying. Thereupon Mrs. Knowles had a sudden return of irritation. "Well, well," said she; "I am only an old woman, and I don't suppose I shall do any good by meddling. Let us change the subject. How long are you going to remain at Southlands? Why don't you go off somewhere in that yacht of yours, since you dislike this climate so much?"

"I shall never yacht any more," answered Gervis. "I am getting too old to like being tossed about. I shall stay where I am, I think; or, if it becomes quite intolerable here, perhaps I may go up to London for a time. But I can send Claud away at any moment, if that is what you mean. We understand one another's ways; and really, do you know, he has more common sense than you give him credit for."

Mrs. Knowles shook her head, and murmured that these things were not a question of common

sense; but she did not mention to what things she alluded; nor did Mr. Gervis ask her to explain herself.

"Did you ever chance," he inquired, after a short interval of silence, "to come across an amphibious being of the name of Burvill in any of your charitable expeditions?"

"Oh dear, yes; and a lazy, good-for-nothing old sot he is too. Has he been imposing upon you, eh?"

"Not exactly that; but it happened that, a short time ago, I was in a position to do him a small service; and by way of showing his gratitude, he came up, the other day, to blacken the character of some of my friends, and to warn me solemnly against nursing vipers in my bosom. It appears that I am an object of solicitude to all classes."

"Did he? I should never have given the man credit for so much good feeling. You may put it as you like, but to my mind it speaks well for him that he should have troubled himself at all in the matter. It really was a thoughtful thing to do."

"Was it not? He could have done no more if he had been the lord-lieutenant himself—and so I told him. Only, as he was not the lord-lieutenant, and could therefore be insulted with

impunity, I made so bold as to add that he was a malicious rascal, and probably a liar into the bargain. After which, I gave him half-a-crown and commended him to the keeping of the devil."

"What a shocking way of speaking! I wonder he didn't knock you down."

"I gave him the half-crown first, you see."

"And what, pray, was it that he told you?" asked Mrs. Knowles, who, I fear, is not altogether exempt from that feminine inquisitiveness which she condemns so strongly in younger people.

"Well, he brought some specific charges against Miss Flemyng, I believe," answered Gervis, getting up slowly, and struggling into his coat. "If I remember rightly, he had seen her kissing somebody—her father, no doubt, or one of her brothers, who, I am told, assemble here in large numbers towards Christmas-time. But, to tell you the truth, Mrs. Knowles, I did not care to pursue the subject, feeling that it was one which could never possess even the remotest interest for me. I am afraid I must tear myself away now. Many thanks for your tea and your well-deserved rebuke. It will interest you to hear that I am aching from head to foot, and have every prospect of a sleepless night before me in which to ponder it."

And so Mr. Gervis took his leave.

Mrs. Knowles has an ancient and valuable maid, who has dressed and undressed her for a trifle of half a century, and to whom she confides some of the vexations of the day before going to sleep. After she had hoisted herself into bed that night, she sat up, and thus addressed this trusty attendant:

"Forbes, I am troubled in my mind. There is a very nice young gentleman of my acquaintance who has fallen deeply in love with a young lady who may have her faults, but who, taking her all in all, may pass for a tolerably nice young lady, as young ladies go. He is too young to marry; and if anything had come of this, very likely I should have been sorry; but now nothing is going to come of it, and I am still more sorry."

"Dear, dear! have the young lady refused him, mum?" Forbes asks, with sympathetic interest.

"Not she! But you see, Forbes, my young gentleman is dependent upon a father, who has about as much heart in him as a jelly-fish. So there will be weeping and wailing, and everything will go wrong. Ah, well! I daresay they will get over it."

"They generally do, mum," observes the

sagacious Forbes, withdrawing without asking for further information. Probably her mistress could have told her nothing that she had not known, and fully discussed with Mr. Hicks, long ago.

CHAPTER V.

THE DAYS THAT ARE NO MORE.

It will be seen, from the brief conversation reported at the end of the last chapter, that Mrs. Knowles, despite the hard common sense with which she is universally credited, has in her heart that love of romance and fellow-feeling for young lovers which all good women retain up to their dying day. It is probable, however, that in watching the love-making of others from her present standpoint, she may have forgotten some few of the sensations incidental to that delightful process, and have imagined that, when two people are attached to one another, the fact must be as obvious to themselves as to lookers-on. For we all know what strange tricks perspective will play with distant views, and certainly it is some little time since my grandfather went courting under the elms on summer mornings, anno Domini

1817. Mrs. Knowles, then, perceived that the course of Claud's love was not likely to run smooth, but saw no obstacle in its way, save the sufficiently formidable one of Mr. Gervis's opposition; and doubtless she would have been both surprised and amused had she known that our modest hero was losing a large part of his proper share of sleep every night through the dread, not of paternal prohibition (to which danger, indeed, he had not given a thought), but of unrequited affection.

It is true that he was already almost accepted as one of the family at the Moated House, that Mr. Flemyng's demeanour towards him had entered upon a quasi-benedictory phase, and that Miss Flemyng herself, though not exactly appearing to seek his society, was generally careful to provide him with some excellent pretext for seeking hers; but all this seemed to prove very little, when set against sundry agonies of jealousy roused by Nina's reception of other young men, who, in the natural course of things, visited at the house every now and again. There was one terrible day when the officious dragoon before alluded to tooled the regimental drag over from Lynchester, and, after remaining to luncheon and monopolizing the whole conversation, actually took Miss

Flemyng away for a long drive. He had brought the colonel's wife with him, so that it was all quite right and proper, and he omitted to offer a seat to Claud, whose presence, in fact, he had persistently ignored from the first. Upon another occasion there turned up a certain yachtsman of engaging personal appearance, but with disgustingly free manners, who had put into Beachborough for a day, and who was easily prevailed upon to dine at the Moated House. This interloper not only devoted himself exclusively to his fair hostess, but had the bad taste to entertain her with allusions to persons and places of which others present knew nothing: while she, alas! encouraged him, listened with interest to his pointless anecdotes, laughed at his feeble jokes, remained for an unconscionable time alone with him in the garden after dinner, and finally gave him a rose to take away with him.

At such times as these Claud would inwardly rage and fume, heaping vituperative epithets upon himself and others, and declaring to himself that the girl was a heartless coquette, that he had been a fool to take her seriously, and that he would assuredly do so no longer. It was all supremely ridiculous, no doubt; but it seems just possible that some reader of these

words may remember to have been almost as absurd himself, once upon a time, and will therefore make allowances for Claud's temporary idiocy. Moreover, Nina was unquestionably even more capricious and perplexing in her ways than the generality of her charming sex. One day she would be melancholy, dreamy, sentimental; the next she would affect a hardened disbelief in all the finer feelings of our nature, and would nip every approach to tenderness in the bud by laughter too hearty to be feigned. Sometimes she was silent; sometimes she was discouragingly friendly; sometimes she looked bored, and confessed that she was so with every appearance of sincerity. I can't tell what occult pleasure the feminine mind derives from conduct of this sort, nor why young women should thus delight in torturing their prey—what should I, *cælebs*, know of such matters?—but I am given to understand that, to borrow Mrs. Forbes's comprehensive expression, "they generally do." Doubtless they understand what they are about, and are aware that there are very few lovers in the world so faint-hearted as to be dissuaded from their purpose by the vagaries of the beloved object. Certainly Claud was not one of these, sundry asseverations, prompted by

jealousy, notwithstanding. Like all his family, he had an immense supply of latent obstinacy; and, having once realized that Nina Flemyng was absolutely necessary to his happiness, he registered an inward vow that, sooner or later, she should bear his name.

At a subsequent period of his life he was kind enough to inform me of the exact date on which this modest determination was arrived at.

"It was on the twenty-third of September—a soft, misty, melancholy sort of afternoon—and I was walking through the woods towards the church, where I knew that she was helping the parson's daughters to put up the harvest decorations. I don't know whether it was the sight of the falling leaves and the feeling that summer was dead and gone, or whether it was the remembrance of some vague hints which the governor had let fall, at breakfast time, about sending me round in the yacht to meet him at Marseilles; but somehow or other, it seemed to come over me all of a sudden that there would have to be an end to all this, and that I was very near it. I dare say you will hardly believe me; but it is the simple truth that, up to that moment, I had never once asked myself what that end was to be."

Here Claud's ingenuous biographer expresses much surprise; and the young man continues: "Don't misunderstand me. Of course I had known all along that, in a general sort of way, love leads to marriage, just as life leads to death —you needn't smile; I am not suggesting any analogies—but till then I had not thought much more about my wedding than I do now about my funeral; and between ourselves, I doubt very much whether anybody ever does turn his mind to either of those ceremonies before he is obliged. Well, you know, there always comes a time when one has to face realities; and it came to me that afternoon in the woods. I could show you the very spot where I stood under a beech-tree, and swore that Nina Flemyng should be Nina Gervis. You know with what result; but this was the way of it."

Claud has a sufficiently graphic, though somewhat disjointed, method of narration. Perhaps the subsequent events of that memorable afternoon may as well be related in his words as in mine.

"It was past five o'clock, and growing dark in that grey weather, when I got to the church. I pushed the door open softly, and peeped in. There she was, on the steps leading up to the chancel, holding a wreath of hops in her hand

with a group of those sturdy Pardoe girls a little below her, and St. John, the curate, in his cassock, by her side. I never could stand that fellow—I don't know why. They had twined hops round the pillars, and stuck wheat and barley everywhere, and filled the embrasures of the windows with the kindly fruits of the earth, in the shape of turnips and swedes and I don't know what other appropriate monstrosities, and now, I suppose, they were taking a final complacent survey of their handiwork. Can't you see it all?—the little dark church, with its hideous modern east-window looking quite soft and beautiful in the twilight; Jacky and Tommy, evidently up to some mischief or other, moving stealthily about in the background; the Miss Pardoes, thickset, robust specimens of the British maiden; the priest in his long *soutane;* and that perfect figure standing out from among them all, like—like—upon my word, I don't know what she was like. I was insanely in love at the time, and perhaps I may have compared her mentally to some saintly apparition, surrounded by a knot of mere mortals—which simile, I see, has the effect of choking you with suppressed laughter. Laugh out loud, if you like; don't mind me. Saint or sinner, there never was a more ex-

quisitely-formed creature; and who with eyes in his head could have helped adoring her beauty?

"After a time the children caught sight of the manly shape in the doorway, and came running up to whisper to me that they had concealed a string of onions in the pulpit and had put some hard turnips under the cushions of the Rectory pew, in the corner where fat Mrs. Pardoe used to sit. And then the others turned round, and advanced down the aisle in a little procession; and very soon we had all said good-night, and she and I were walking back through the woods together. We had got rid of the children, I forget by what stratagem, and were tolerably certain of not encountering another human being on our way. So you see, if opportunity was what I wanted, there was nothing to complain of.

"She was in one of her silent, abstracted moods, and I remember that neither of us spoke a word for quite a long time—not until we were well into the thick of the woods. Then I said something about not having known before that she was such a zealous churchwoman; (for just before we started, I had heard that fellow St. John reproaching her with her long neglect of the daily services) and

I asked her whether she had a weakness for forms and ceremonies.

"'I go in for them by fits and starts,' she answered. 'When I am sick of the world, I fall back upon the Church—for a week or two. Once upon a time I used to fancy I should like to be a very good woman; and I did make one vigorous attempt. For about two months I got on capitally. I fasted all through Lent, and rose at unearthly hours, so as to be present at matins, where the congregation generally consisted of the Pardoes and myself, and I studied a number of pretty little illuminated books, which Mr. St. John gave me, and altogether discharged my duties in a manner that gave satisfaction to the clergy of the parish. But when it came to the chapter of good works I broke down. I couldn't stand stuffy cottages and dirty people, who had unpleasant things the matter with them and delighted in thrusting horrors under my very nose. I gave it all up, and fell back into my old bad ways. The London season happened to be in full swing at the time; so I got an invitation from somebody, and fled; and since then I have confined my religious exercises to decorating the church and singing in the choir.'

"'You do visit the poor sometimes, all the same,' I put in. For you see, I did not choose that my ideal should have any flaws; and it is a fact that, only a few days before, she had refused to go out riding with me on the plea that she had to take some port wine to an old woman in the village.

"'That was only a bit of show-off,' she answered coolly, when I reminded her of this incident. 'I wanted to make an impression upon you. If you hadn't been there, the wine would have been sent down by a servant, as usual.'

"I told her plainly that I had two good reasons for disbelieving that assertion. First: that I knew perfectly well that she never tried to impose upon anybody (which was true, mind you), and second: that I could not flatter myself that she cared so much as that for my good opinion. 'Besides,' I added, 'my opinion of you was formed long ago—if that is of any importance—and no self-disparagement of yours is likely to alter it.'

"At that she laughed. 'You are a poet,' she said; 'your imagination turns geese into swans, and women into angels. And after all, why not? I only wish I could feel as you do.'

"And then she began quoting some lines out

of that silly little volume of mine. It *was* a silly little collection of rubbish, eh, Knowles?"

Claud, at the time of this conversation, was in a position to listen with equanimity to criticisms upon his earlier efforts; so I felt no difficulty in replying that "Here and There" was not, in my poor judgment, likely to add much to its author's fame.

"Yes—well—I know. But supposing that you were a very young author and very much in love, and that you were hearing the most adorable voice in the world reciting your compositions in a soft undertone, don't you think you would discover beauties in them whose existence you had never suspected before? I am not more vain than another, but I am free to confess that, as I listened, my own feeble words sounded as musical to me as any that Alfred de Musset had ever written. It was a little song that she quoted — some stanzas headed 'Les Bienheureux,' the burden of which was that there was no need for men to be for ever straining their eyes towards some far-away future heaven, since heaven was here, around us, for those who were not too blind to discern it. *Cieux—yeux—bienheureux*—you perceive how easily the beauties of Nature, the achievements of art and the smiles of the

beloved could be made to furnish the requisite number of lines and rhymes. Now that I am grown so old and wise, and know the world so well, I have of course found out that these sentiments have neither the advantage of novelty nor of truth to recommend them; but in spite of that, and of—other changes that have taken place, I love the old song still, and every now and then, when I am in a sentimental mood, I find myself humming it over *sotto voce*. It isn't of the meaning of the words that I think—'See-saw, Margery Daw' would do as well—but of those autumn woods, and the fading grey light, and Nina walking beside me in her tight-fitting homespun dress. I was absurdly flattered and delighted at this proof of her having studied my works. I could not at all express what I felt, and stammered out I hardly remember what incoherent rhapsodies, to which she seemed to lend a rather inattentive ear. She interrupted me without ceremony when we reached an open space, where they had been cutting down, and where numbers of faggots were piled up, ready to be carted away. A sudden idea had occurred to her.

"'Let us sit down and make a fire,' she said. 'If there is a thing I love, it is a fire out of doors; and my hands are frozen.'

"I hesitated for a moment; for I knew very little of country life at that time, and I was not sure whether we might not be arrested for stealing wood, or run some risk of burning down the whole plantation. But, dear me! I would have set the Thames on fire, or tried to do so, if she had ordered it; so I collected the driest sticks I could find, and very soon, with the help of some old letters which she produced from her pocket, we had kindled as cheery a bonfire as you could wish to see, and she was sitting on the ground, holding up her hands to the blaze. Such hands! I don't know whether you have ever happened to notice them; but if you have, you must be aware that they are Nina's strongest point. As I saw them then, with the red light of the flames shining between the taper fingers, and striking out flashes from the diamond rings upon them, I thought to myself that they could have no rivals in the world. And for that matter, I think so still.

"Well; I sat for some time, watching those marvellous hands in speechless admiration, and listening to the crackling of the sticks, and to another strange sound that there was in the air. Do you know the noise that distant flocks of sheep make when they are being driven into fold in the evening? It is a most curious, in-

describable sound, like a continuous murmur of human voices rising and falling in the far, far distance—a mournful uncanny kind of sound. I can never hear it now without a sick sensation of regret and yearning, and——but no matter. You would never understand how the bleating of a prosaic sheep could suggest romantic fancies to anybody. Between ourselves, I tried once to make it the theme of a poetical fragment; but I found that it really wouldn't do.

"I was saying that I sat for a long time beside her, without saying a word. You see, we had passed beyond the region of small-talk. If I had opened my lips at all, I must have blurted out a passionate declaration; and this I would not do; because, if you must know the truth, I was frightened. It was all very well to assure myself that I must succeed, and would; but when it came to the push, how could I help feeling that it was the height of audacity in me to aspire to the heart of this beautiful and fastidious creature, and that it would be quite in accordance with what I knew of her if she were to receive my vows with a peal of laughter?

"However, I kept edging nearer and nearer to her, as she sat, lost in thought, staring at the leaping flames; and at last she turned her head

all of a sudden, and looked at me. And then—ah, my dear Knowles, I am not going to tell you what happened then. With your experience and your imaginative gifts, you ought to have no difficulty in filling up a blank space of ten minutes or so. Anyhow, I don't care to talk much about it. Good Heavens! how happy I was! I wonder how many times I made her repeat 'I love you!—I love you!' It all seemed too wonderful, too beautiful to be real; and if I could have made Time stand still then, the world would never have grown any older from that day to this. It was perfect felicity. I wanted nothing more. It only comes once in a life-time; that sort of thing, doesn't it? Or do you think, as she did, that love is a kind of intermittent fever, which recurs at regular intervals, runs its course, and leaves the patient no worse than he was before?

"I don't know what ecstatic nonsense I may have talked during those first moments of bliss; but no doubt I said something about that absurd wish of mine that all the future could be condensed into one long present; for I well remember how she brought me back to my senses with a laugh that ended in a sigh.

"'You are like me then,' she said; 'you are afraid of the future.'

"'Afraid?' I echoed, 'No, I am not afraid; why should I be? All I intended to say was that no future can be *better* than this.'

"'No,' she said; 'there never can be anything better. We are both happy now. It is all very sweet and beautiful; but it will not last—and that is the pity of it.'

"She had said, or at least hinted, as much to me a hundred times before; and I had been used to laugh at her and call her a cynic and a pessimist when she expounded her dreary views of human life and character; but it vexed me that she should take up that tone then, and I asked her rather indignantly whether she doubted me. She made no reply; so I said, 'Perhaps you are not sure of yourself.'

"'Perhaps not,' she answered, quietly and sadly.

"This was dreadful. I withdrew my arm from her waist; I dropped her hand, and stammered out that, if that were so—if that were so—— The remainder of my sentence somehow stuck in my throat.

"But she took my hand again, and began turning the ring on my little finger round and round, while she spoke in that caressing voice of hers. 'Don't be angry with me. Don't let us quarrel already. Is it my fault that I can't,

for the life of me, help seeing the truth? I wish I didn't. It would be much pleasanter if I could deceive myself, as other people do. I know you love me, Claud; and if you could look into my heart, you would find that I love you too, beyond everything in the world. What more can I say? If you think that we shall go on for ever loving each other as we do now, you are wrong. It can't be so. It never was so, and it never will be. What made you fall in love with me? You won't answer me truly; and perhaps you don't know. But I know. It was because I have a pretty face, which you will tire of in a year or two, and which will grow ugly besides. It was because your fancy was taken by something in my manner of talking or walking, or I don't know what about me. But you will get familiar with all that, and it will soon lose its charm. Love is not eternal. There is a sober kind of steady affection which may succeed to it, if all goes well; but that is not the same thing; and when one looks at the households of one's friends, and when one remembers all the worries and misunderstandings that are sure to crop up between two people who have to live together, it seems as if the chances were against even so much as that. And as for the love that you and I have

now, and would die rather than lose, it must go. We shall lose it, and we shall not die, or want to die—there is the curse of humanity. People persuade themselves that love will last for ever —at all events in their own case. Just in the same way nine-tenths of the world persuade themselves there is a God and a future life—not because they are convinced, but because it would be too miserable to doubt. That is why I go in for religion by fits and starts, as I told you just now. For, after all, I am made of the same clay as the rest of them, and am only a woman besides. Sometimes I can humbug myself a little; but when my head is quite clear and my eyes wide open, I see, as Solomon saw, that all things are altogether vanity, and that there is one end to all, and that all that cometh is vanity.'

"I can't tell you how long she went on in this strain. I have never heard her speak with anything like the same seriousness upon any subject since. I haven't repeated the half of what she said, and of course it is impossible to make you understand the horrible conviction that her words seemed to carry with them. But it was hardly likely that I should allow myself to yield to the influence of such gloomy forebodings. I listened as long as I could, and

when I could not bear it any longer, I stopped her. I broke out into an excited tirade, which I won't inflict upon you; I swore that, whatever the love of other men might be, mine should end only with my existence, and that I would make her love me too in the same way, in spite of all. And then she drew me towards her, and stroked my hair, and called me a foolish boy; and so we made friends. Oh, dear! I think I have talked nearly enough now, haven't I? How infernally hot this room is! My drink is finished, and my tale is told, and my cigar is gone out, and it is high time for you to be in bed, old Knowles. Give me a tumbler of something with ice in it, and let us be off."

Claud dined with me, the other day, at my club, and afterwards made the foregoing confession to me in the smoking-room, where I noticed that a good many of the members stared at him, wondering perhaps who was the handsome, foreign-looking fellow who was discoursing with such a profusion of gesture and animation to his friend with the grizzled beard. Possibly some of them may have known already; for Claud's name has been mentioned with tolerable frequency in London of late.

But it is in the events of his past, not of his present life, that the reader is supposed to be interested.

CHAPTER VI.

MR. GERVIS'S VIEWS.

CLAUD returned to Southlands in such a state of radiant happiness, his behaviour during dinner was marked by so much absence of mind and indifference to the food set before him, and his answers to the most ordinary questions were of so ridiculously irrelevant a character, that he might just as well have divulged the events of the afternoon there and then. He preferred, however, to keep what he was pleased to consider his secret all to himself for another twelve hours; and no doubt he went to bed as happy as a king, and slept more soundly than he had any right to do under the circumstances.

But in due course came the morning, and with it the disagreeable necessity for a few words with the head of the family—a necessity rendered doubly disagreeable by that gentle-

man's demeanour at breakfast. It cannot be said that Mr. Gervis was ever in a bad temper, properly so called; but there were days on which it was useless to expect anything from him in the shape of sympathy, pity, or favour; and those who knew him best had learnt to discern the advent of one of these stormy periods by certain infallible signs. For instance, a particular attention to dress was evidence, so to speak, of unsettled atmospheric conditions; great deference of manner and mellifluousness of language might be taken to mean, "Barometer falling; hoist south cone;" and a short dry cough, recurring at frequent intervals, indicated the approach of a large and deep depression. Now when our luckless lover saw his father arrayed in a perfectly new suit of blue serge; when he heard solicitous inquiries addressed to Miss Potts on the subject of her cold and apologies to Geneviève for the trouble to which she was put in pouring out a second cup of coffee; when, finally, he was himself greeted by the expression of a hope that he had slept well, nothing more than the subdued "Ahem!" which followed was needed to make what he had to expect obvious to him. He foresaw that his news would meet with a discouraging reception, that he would certainly

be snubbed and sneered at, and that he would probably be made to feel excessively uncomfortable before he had said his say. Still, the thing had to be done, and there was no use in putting off the evil moment. So, when Mr. Gervis rose at length from the breakfast-table and walked slowly into the library, Claud followed him thither, and opened fire rather nervously.

"Governor," he began, fidgeting about the room in a way which he knew that his father disliked, but which he felt, for the moment quite powerless to control, "I am going to make you laugh."

Gervis, who had already settled himself in an arm-chair and had opened a book, looked up, and said "Yes?" with an air of resigned urbanity.

"You will think it utterly absurd," continued Claud incoherently, "very natural, I'm sure; and so it is, in a way—only every one must choose for himself, as I have often heard you say; and what is one man's meat is another man's poison. I know I am a great deal too young for that kind of thing—at least, from your point of view; but there again you can't lay down any hard and fast rule; and if you knew all about it from the beginning—but it's

so confoundedly difficult to explain, and——" Here the speaker's voice sank into an unintelligible murmur.

"I beg your pardon a thousand times," said Gervis, suavely; "but at the risk of being considered hopelessly dull, I must confess that I have not the least idea of what you are talking about."

"I know. I haven't begun yet. I—oh, *bother!* The long and the short of it is, governor, that I am going to be married. Now!"

"That," said Mr. Gervis, with cool deliberation, "is undoubtedly a capital joke. There is a dry humour about it, and about your manner of delivering it, which I quite appreciate. But, as Lord Chesterfield justly observes, true wit never yet excited laughter; so I hope you will pardon my not bursting into a loud guffaw. Pray, when did you form this—remarkable determination?"

"Only yesterday afternoon," answered Claud, trying not to look shamefaced, and failing lamentably. "At least, things were not settled till then."

"And you let me into the secret of your plans already! Really that is most considerate of you."

After this there was a silence which Claud hardly knew how to break. Finding, however, that his father showed no disposition to help him out, he resumed, at last, timidly—

"You haven't asked the lady's name."

Let me see. There are five unmarried ladies in the neighbourhood with whom you are, I believe, tolerably intimate—Lady Croft, Mrs. Knowles, Miss Potts, Miss Croft, and Miss Flemyng. The three first may be considered, for various reasons, as ineligible; and we thus find the list narrowed to two. Perhaps I may go so far as to hazard a conjecture that Miss Flemyng is the person whom you have honoured by your preference."

Claud nodded.

"I congratulate you upon your good taste. And do I understand that you have proposed to her, and that she has accepted you?"

Claud nodded again.

"Ah! And may I inquire in what way you propose to support yourself and your wife? It is a matter of minor importance, no doubt; but it is one upon which I feel some curiosity."

The blood rushed into Claud's cheeks. This question, which to most sons placed as he was would have appeared natural and inevitable, found him wholly unprepared with a reply. His

whole training had led him to regard money as a mere appendage of civilized existence, a useful article which some people were so unfortunate as to lack, but which possessed no intrinsic claim upon the attention of those who had enough of it for their wants. He had never been put upon an allowance, or requested to render an account of his expenditure. His father had paid all bills and had furnished him with what pocket-money he required, and it had not once occurred to him to regard himself in any other light than that of a rich man. While dressing, that morning, and sketching out sundry indefinite plans for the future, he had fancied it not unlikely that Southlands might be assigned to him as his residence. And now he was asked in what way he proposed to support himself! He had nothing to say, and could only stare blankly at his bland interrogator.

"Because, you know," pursued Mr. Gervis, after waiting in vain for an answer, "you are entirely dependent upon me for the necessaries of life; and I can hardly suppose you so ignorant of all my wishes and convictions as to imagine that I should supply you with the means of committing a sort of moral suicide. You have so often heard me state my views upon marriage in general, and early marriages in particular,

that I feel it would be a sheer waste of time to repeat them now. Some day or other you will, no doubt, take a wife; very few men have the luck or the sense to remain bachelors all their lives. But you will not (if I can prevent it) marry for many years to come; nor will you (if I can prevent it) marry Miss Flemyng."

"I swear I will never marry any one else," broke in Claud, resolutely, and rather defiantly.

"No, no; don't swear; what is the use? Your common sense must tell you that you are entirely in my power, and that you have no alternative but to yield to my wishes, whether you think them unreasonable or not. I am sorry for you; but it can't be helped."

"I am of age," said Claud.

"Yes; but I hold the purse-strings; so that, for all practical purposes, you might just as well be an infant."

Claud turned on his heel, and walked away to the window. He was determined not to lose his temper, and just at that moment he could not trust himself to speak. For some minutes he remained gazing out at the grey landscape and the leaves that were whirling down from the trees in the park; then he came back slowly, and stood, with one elbow upon the mantelpiece, looking down upon his father.

"Listen, governor. If you have a strong will, so have I. We won't quarrel over it; but if one of us is to yield, I shall not be that one. I can't deny your power to keep me for some time to come in a condition of slavery, or, as you say, infancy; but this I want to know: have you brought about this absurd state of affairs deliberately and designedly? Because, if so, I think I have a fair right to say that no one was ever more unjustly treated. It seems to me that I was entitled to one of two things—either to be brought up as the heir to a considerable property, and to be given a sufficient income to live as heirs of rich men generally do, or to be put in the way of earning my own livelihood. As for being kept like a pet dog, and allowed every luxury, provided I do not disobey my master, I tell you frankly that that does not suit me at all, and that I will not submit to it one hour longer than is absolutely necessary. I would rather break stones on the road."

"Yes; that is your case," said Mr. Gervis calmly, "and I admit that it is a strong one. I will recur to it presently. In the meantime, allow me very briefly to state my own. To begin with, I need scarcely point out to you that in what I do I can have no other aim than to serve your interests. Were I to consult my

personal comfort, I should let everybody go to the deuce in his own way; for if I have a weakness, it is for peace and quietness, and if there is one thing that I dislike more than another, it is a scene such as we are now struggling through—with some degree of propriety, I am glad to say; still with much discomfort on both sides. To expect you to believe that I know better than you do what is for your happiness would be to expect a miracle; nevertheless, so it is; and I have to shape my conduct in accordance with facts, not fancies. I might, of course, have put a stop to your little *affaire de cœur* long ago; but it seemed to me much wiser not to interfere. *Affaires de cœur* are very good things, and, at your age, simply inevitable. They elevate, they refine, they give knowledge of feminine nature, which is a very necessary subject for men of the world to be acquainted with; and some people, I believe, find them pleasant to look back upon in after life. According to my lights, nothing more fortunate can happen to a young fellow than to fall in love with an agreeable, clever married woman a few years older than himself, and, if possible, a step or two above him in rank. There is little or no risk in affairs of that description, and as a part of

education they are invaluable. Young girls are less improving and more dangerous; because in their case the question of marriage is apt to crop up, and——"

"Excuse my interrupting you," said Claud, who had listened to this leisurely dissertation with ill-disguised impatience; "but will you tell me whether you have any objection to urge against Nina individually?"

"We need not go into that. I have no desire to hurt your feelings, and your opinion of the young person's merits will probably not be influenced by mine."

"Probably not; but I should like to hear your opinion, if you don't mind."

"As you please. I should object, then, to Miss Flemyng as a daughter-in-law under any circumstances. I have studied her a little, and if it were at all worth while, I could give you many excellent reasons for my objection. However, two of them will answer the purpose, being quite conclusive. She is selfish and she is greedy of admiration. With women of that stamp domestic life is an impossibility, *pure et simple*."

"You will judge Nina differently some day," observed Claud. "I am willing to wait until you shall be better acquainted with her."

"So am I—more than willing. Now, if you please, we will pass to the second part of our subject. You have found my remarks a little incoherent hitherto, I dare say."

"Not at all," said Claud politely.

"Ah—well, they were meant to be incoherent, at any rate. As regards your financial position, I shall endeavour, on the contrary, to be perfectly lucid. You complain—very reasonably, I think—that you have neither been educated for a profession nor allowed the quasi-independence of a rich man's son. Now I am, I suppose, about the very worst man of business in Europe. I have always hated money-matters, and have never troubled myself about them. At the present moment I am, I believe, tolerably well off; but it happens that my fortune is subject to sudden and indefinite calls, which have already obliged me to sell out investments, which have increased of late years, and will probably continue to increase; and whether, at my death, you will find yourself what is called a rich man is really more than I can tell you. Taking everything into consideration, I have decided to put you henceforth upon an allowance of seven hundred pounds a year. Upon that allowance you ought to be able to live comfortably, and under no circum-

stances whatever will it be augmented. Be so good as to fix that fact in your mind once and for all. I need not tell you that whenever it suits you to live here, or on board the yacht, or in my étage in Paris, you will be heartily welcome to do so; but I wish you distinctly to understand that from this day you are entirely free and your own master. You will come and go as you like, and as often as you like. I shall not question your movements, nor attempt to exercise any control over them. If this arrangement meets with your approval I shall be very glad; but at the same time, I may as well tell you that I shall neither make nor even discuss any other."

Claud considered for a short space. "I don't think I could reasonably ask for anything more," he said, at length. "It has all come upon me rather suddenly, and I don't know that I see my way quite clearly as yet. Do you mean that I am to have seven hundred pounds a year from to-day, to do as I like with?"

"That," said Mr. Gervis, "is what I mean."

"Because, if so, I must repeat what I said before, that I intend to marry Nina Flemyng, and nobody else; and it appears to me that we could set up house very well upon seven

hundred pounds a year. Would you withdraw the allowance if I married against your wishes?"

"My dear fellow," said Mr. Gervis, "I have no doubt that there are several good stout ropes in different parts of this establishment, with any one of which you could satisfactorily hang yourself, if you were so minded. I am not going to have them all withdrawn in order to remove temptation from your way. There are certain lines of conduct against which no one, except a congenital idiot, requires to be protected; and when I said just now that you should not marry Miss Fleming, if I could prevent it, I never meant to imply that I should use other than rational means of prevention. For a man of your habits to marry upon seven hundred pounds a year is practically an impossibility. I have a firm conviction that your own good sense will tell you that much, when you have had time to consider of it."

"Hundreds and thousands of people marry upon less," returned Claud; "but let us waive that question. Surely you must see that, even if I were too selfish to like the prospect of economy and discomfort, I should still be bound in honour to carry out my engagement. I wonder what you think I ought to say to Nina this afternoon?"

"That, my good friend, is your affair, not mine. However, if I were in your predicament, I should simply lay the bare facts before her, and leave her to draw her own conclusions from them. I may have formed a mistaken estimate of her character, but my confident expectation is that she will call me bad names, shed some natural tears, but dry them soon, and send you about your business."

"*My* confident expectation is that she will do nothing of the kind. You must remember that she knows what it is to be hard up, and that what you consider a miserable pittance may appear a decent enough provision to her. I hope and believe that she will think so, and that, having accepted me when she supposed me to be a rich man, she won't throw me over, now that she finds me to be a poor one."

"Very well. I must warn you, though, that if you marry, I shall no longer be able to offer you quarters here or elsewhere. For you there will be room, but for a wife and an indefinite number of squalling infants there certainly will not. I believe that pretty well exhausts what I have to say upon the subject. I have done my best for you, and I wash my hands of all responsibility as regards the future."

"I perfectly understand that my life belongs to myself, and that I alone am answerable for what is made of it," said Claud. "I ask for nothing better; and you may depend upon it that I will give you no trouble in a pecuniary way. Well, I must be going now." He made for the door, as he spoke; but when his hand was upon the lock, he paused, and looked back. Gervis had drawn his arm-chair close to the fire, and was stooping over it, one thin, transparent hand extended to the blaze, the other, which shook a little, holding up the open volume of Balzac which had been laid aside half an hour before. Something pathetic in the attitude of the bending figure, which was that of an old man, despite its slimness and the somewhat youthful cut of its garb, touched Claud's heart with a twinge of pity and compunction. A hundred memories of bygone days and bygone kindnesses recurred to him as he looked; and all at once he seemed to realize the utter isolation of that queer old man who had gone through the world forgiving injuries with cool contempt, relieving the needy with a sneer, never doing an ungenerous action nor speaking a generous word—understood by few, hated by many, and loved by none, unless it were by the son who was now abandoning him without one

sign of regret. Our young prodigal was as soft-hearted a sinner as ever set forth to face this world of sorrow and disappointment; and it needed no diet of husks to rouse his dormant sense of filial duty. He recrossed the room, and laid his hand gently upon his father's shoulder.

"Governor," said he, "we've knocked about a great deal together, and we've had some good days, and there have been jokes, and there have been troubles, and—and we've been the best of friends through it all, haven't we? Don't let us quarrel now."

Mr. Gervis closed his book, keeping one finger in it to mark the place, and looked up, with an air of some surprise. "I assure you," he said, "I have not the slightest intention of quarrelling with you—or with anybody. Quarrelling is ill-bred and silly; and really, when you come to think of it, nothing in the world is worth the trouble of quarrelling about. We have, as you truly say, been good friends, and during the last few years we have seen a great deal of each other. Whether we shall continue to do so will depend entirely upon yourself. All this is very wearing; but for once in a way I suppose it must be gone through. I quoted Lord Chesterfield to you just now; perhaps

I can't explain my feelings towards you better than by quoting him again. 'As I have no womanish weakness for your person,' says he, in one of his letters to his son, 'your merit must, and will, be the only measure of my kindness.' And all through his correspondence you will continually come across such phrases as, 'To talk of natural affection is talking nonsense'—'Be persuaded that I shall love you as long as you deserve it, and not one moment longer'—and so forth. I don't go quite that length. I am not prepared to assert that there is no such thing as natural affection; though you may certainly look upon me as wholly devoid of it; nor do I pretend that the affection which I have for you will be increased or diminished according to your merits. Speeches of that description are out of date, and were never quite sincerely uttered, I should imagine. But this I will say—that there is no soft side of me to be worked upon, and that, if you persist in doing what I dislike, you will put it quite out of the question for me to meet you often. That, however, signifies very little. In a few years I shall be out of all this, and our mutual relations will no longer interest either of us. The important thing is that you should not ruin your career in order to gratify a boyish

whim. I believe I have made it impossible for you to do this—as impossible, at least, as I care to make it. I have absolutely no fear as to the result; and therefore I can't see any necessity for our going through a scene over it. I wish you would go away, and let me read in peace."

"I will go away in a minute, and I will promise not to make a scene, governor; only I do wish I could persuade you that I am in earnest," said Claud. "You don't believe in love, I know——"

"Not as a permanent affliction," interpolated Mr. Gervis.

"Well; but the difference between us is that I do. Nothing will prevent my marrying Nina, if she will have me; and, whatever you may say, there is not really any impossibility in living on seven hundred pounds a year. Besides," added Claud hesitatingly, "I think perhaps I may be able to make some small additions to my income."

"Here and there, I suppose," said Mr. Gervis, glancing up, with a faint smile.

Claud reddened slightly. "You know then? You have seen the book? Why did you never say anything about it?"

"You did not honour me with your con-

fidence," replied his father; "and you know it is my rule to avoid intrusion as far as possible."

"I was afraid to tell you; I did not want you to laugh at me. You thought it awful rubbish, of course."

"No; I thought it a very creditable, amateurish sort of performance. I read your verses with a good deal of pleasure, and to be quite frank, I expected that the fact of their simultaneous appearance in two languages would have attracted more notice than it seems to have done. An idle man might fill up his leisure time worse than by composing pretty imitations of the minor poets; but your publishers will probably have left you in no doubt as to whether copying deeds for a lawyer is not, upon the whole, a more lucrative employment."

"Versifying is not the only mode of composition that exists," remarked Claud.

"And you think you have a gift for prose? It may be so for aught I know; and I am sure I hope it is. I wish you every success. Remember, however, that in literature, as in all other trades, there is an apprenticeship to be served, and that in the majority of cases it is not a short one. Even such a man as this," continued Mr. Gervis, tapping the cover of *La*

Peau de Chagrin, "had to struggle for years against poverty and obscurity before he could force the stupid public to pay him for his work. With the highest respect for you, I see no cause to suppose that you are a second Balzac; and that is one reason why I should advise you not to count upon making a fortune by your pen before you are grey-headed."

"I don't expect to make a fortune at all," Claud declared modestly; "but I may make something. If I can earn a hundred a year to start with, I shall be satisfied."

"And Miss Flemyng? Will she be equally moderate in her wishes, do you think?"

"That is exactly what I am going to ask her."

"Then, for goodness' sake, go. I trust she will find you more entertaining than I have done. *Au plaisir!*"

So the old man went back to his novel, while the young one set forth to play his part in the brief romance of real life; and doubtless each in his heart pitied the other.

CHAPTER VII.

NINA'S VIEWS.

At the southernmost extremity of the diminished property belonging to the Moated House, there is a space of artificial water, covering perhaps an area of an acre and a half, which is still dignified by the name of the Lake. Very likely it may have deserved its appellation in bygone years—the gradual outward slope of the hollow in which it lies, and the thick growth of sedge and bulrushes with which its shores are fringed, seem to imply as much—but it has shrunk, even as the domain of those who laid it out has shrunk, and nowadays is only a dismal, muddy pond, suggestive in all its aspects of vicissitude and fallen fortunes. I have seen somewhere an old engraving representing a party of gentlemen in laced coats and knee-breeches assisting ladies in powder and patches and hoops to land upon the little island whose tangled undergrowth has

long been the undisputed territory of water-fowl and water-rats. It might be the very punt once occupied by that courtly company which now lies, rotting and filled with water among the rushes of the margin. Traces of winding, moss-grown paths are visible among the trees, beyond which rises the higher ground of the park; and a dilapidated summer-house of Chinese design is dimly reflected in the stagnant water.

It was this rather melancholy spot that Nina had agreed upon with Claud as the scene of their first rendezvous; and here it was that he found her at the appointed time, sitting, clad in a perfectly-made costume of brown with touches of red about it, a small velvet hat trimmed with sable on her head, and a jacket deeply bordered with the same costly fur flung back from her shoulders. She was crunching bonbons in a leisurely, contented way, as she waited, without apparent impatience or anxiety for her lover to show himself—an almost startling embodiment of health, life and beauty amid all that silence and decay. She must have heard the sound of approaching footsteps long before Claud reached her side, but it was not until he was almost touching her that she turned her head, with a nod and a bright smile, and held up her bag of bonbons.

"Genuine Paris *fondants*," said she, with her mouth full. "Forwarded to me this morning by a wandering admirer. Take one: you can't think how good they are."

Something in the action or the words, or both, jarred upon Claud's sensitive feelings. This was not exactly the sort of welcome that he had been picturing to himself whilst hurrying across country to keep his tryst, and it vexed him to see Nina so light-hearted and careless at a time when his happiness and hers were alike trembling in the balance of fate. But the next instant he took himself to task for his injustice; for how was she to guess what hindrances had been cast in the path of true love that morning? It was now his business to enlighten her; but he thought he might claim a brief space of bliss and forgetfulness before proceeding to the performance of so unromantic a duty; and acting upon this conviction, he found no reason to murmur at the fashion in which his advances were received.

A middle-aged bachelor must really not be expected to describe in detail the meeting of two young lovers. The present writer has reached a period of life at which it is no longer permitted to intrude upon the privacy of youths and maidens, and must leave to the knowledge

and imagination of his readers matters with which his mature and modest pen refuses to deal. I declare that when I take my walks along the Beachborough esplanade on summer nights, and come across some amorous shop-boy seated with his sweetheart upon one of the benches provided by a thoughtful municipality, I avert my head, and hurry past as demurely as if I were Miss Pennefather herself. I am a great deal more anxious to avoid looking at them than they are to escape observation. I would not for the world see their absurd kissings and huggings; and as for listening to the nonsense that they are talking, I would as soon open a letter not addressed to me. For of course what is said in such moments is all nonsense, whether it be uttered by a shop-boy or a duke; and if any one chooses to make a suggestion about sour grapes, I beg to reply that grapes very often are sour, and that young folks frequently make themselves ill by partaking of a fruit from which their elders wisely abstain. Do you want to watch two poor creatures in the humiliating position of mistaking sour for sweet? Do you suppose that at my age I am going to gratify your unhealthy craving with dialogues of the Strephon and Amaryllis order? No indeed! If that is what

you require, you must address yourself elsewhere. In this staid and respectable history we will have no love-scenes—at least, no more of them than accuracy of narration demands.

With your permission, then, we will drop the curtain over the first quarter of an hour of Claud's interview with his betrothed, and only raise it just in time to catch a few last words of the description characterized above. The lovers, heedless of colds and rheumatics, have established themselves in a corner of the summerhouse; his arm is round her waist, her head is comfortably pillowed upon his broad shoulder, and his left hand is absently twisting and turning the rings upon her slim fingers.

"And are you sure—quite sure—that you never loved any one but me?" whispers the male idiot.

She glances up at him with a queer look in her grey eyes, while an irrepressible smile of amusement breaks out in every line and dimple of her face. "There was a little boy whom I used to meet at the dancing-class when I was eight years old, and who used to spend all his pocket-money in buying sweets for me," she answers gravely. "I think he was the first. Then there were all my brothers' school and college friends — charming fellows, some of

them, and devoted to me. And I recollect a Captain Ponsonby, a remarkably good-looking and fascinating man, whom I positively adored for a long time. He has since married another, you will be sorry to hear. That was before I came out. Since then, I must have had at least half a dozen strong fancies and three or four serious attachments."

"Oh, Nina!"

"Well, you asked me, you know; and what could I do but tell you the melancholy truth?"

Claud sighs profoundly; but apparently forms a magnanimous resolution to let the dead past bury its dead. "At least," says he, "you will never love anybody but me again."

"Ah, that is assuming a great deal," answers the girl. But looking up at her adorer's lugubrious visage, her humour changes suddenly, and she throws her arms round his neck. "No, no! don't look so sad. It was all untrue, what I told you just now; I only said it to tease you. I never cared a straw for a single one of those stupid people; and I love you a great, great deal—more than you love me, I dare say. Now are you contented?"

"Contented!" Claud could not find words to describe his beatitude, and was compelled to have recourse to other modes of expression.

"And will nothing make you change?"

"Nothing on earth."

"And what you said yesterday——"

"Never mind what I said yesterday. To-day is to-day: let us take it, and be thankful for it."

"Yes; to-day is to-day," says Claud, recalled on a sudden to the remembrance of his duty; "and we must take it as we find it. Nina, darling, something happened to-day that I must tell you about."

"Something disagreeable?"

"I'm afraid it is rather disagreeable. You know I had to face the governor this morning."

"And he threatened to cut you off with a shilling if you married me, didn't he?"

"No; it was not quite so bad as that; but——"

"I know what is coming. Oh, Claud, don't let us have a long engagement! I would far rather part at once and have done with it. I don't think you at all understand what I am, though I have told you often enough, and no doubt there have been plenty of people so kind as to let you hear about all my flirtations. If I were your wife it would be different; but so long as I have to live as I am doing now I

must amuse myself, and I must flirt. I can't help it; it is my nature to be so. And you would be jealous; and there would be quarrels, and explanations, and then more quarrels; and it is easy to see how all that would end. Whatever we do, let us spare ourselves the miserable humiliation of being put upon our trial and breaking down."

The girl spoke with a vehemence which, to Claud's mind, was hardly called for by the occasion. In this first moment of his triumph, the tendency of which Nina had accused herself seemed to him no very heinous offence. He was even disposed to include it in the list of her irresistible charms, and to look with a very lenient eye upon those prospective worshippers whom it might attract. Poor vain creatures, flattering themselves with the hope of gaining a prize above their reach! Might not he who had secured it afford to smile at their fatuity?

"My darling," said he, "I don't think I should ever be jealous of you, or mind what you did, so long as you loved me. But whether our engagement is to be a long or a short one rests only with you. We may be married now, at once, if—if only you are not afraid of marrying a poor man. The governor, you see, is dead against my marrying at all. His own

second marriage, somehow or other, hasn't turned out a success; and so he has got it into his head that everybody else must be equally unfortunate. He told me plainly that he would prevent this if he could; and I made so bold as to answer that I didn't think he would be able to prevent it. But he hasn't behaved badly, all things considered. He hasn't threatened to stop the supplies out and out, as he might have done. What he did was to promise me a small independence—enough for a bachelor; but not enough, as he thinks, for a married man. I must say that I think he owed it me to do as much; still nothing forced him to do it; and, under the circumstances, it was a generous offer. He said he was quite convinced that you would send me about my business as soon as you heard what a pauper I was; and I replied that I was quite convinced that you would do nothing of the sort. I wonder which of us was right!"

It was clearly unreasonable to expect Miss Flemyng to decide between the father and the son in the absence of more specific information. She raised her eyes, with a rather troubled expression, to her lover's, saying, "Well?"

"Well; it is seven hundred a year—not a penny more."

"Seven hundred a year!" repeated Nina, incredulously.

Claud's heart died within him. He made a gesture of assent, being unable to speak.

"Do you mean to say that Mr. Gervis thought he was going to scare us into parting by such a threat as that? He can't have been serious. Why, seven hundred a year, properly managed, is positive wealth. Why in the world shouldn't we marry upon it?"

She was so confident that Claud, after a brief interlude of ecstasy, thought it his duty to descend to details.

"Do you think you realize the self-denial that such an income implies?" he asked. "Take the item of dress alone. Why, this thing"—stroking her dark sables gently—"must have cost more than the whole annual allowance I shall be able to give you, my poor child."

"Oh, but it isn't paid for," answered Nina, placidly.

This was hardly the sort of argument to reassure a prudent economist. "It will have to be paid for, though," he submitted, with a shade of anxiety in his tone.

"Oh, yes; some day. I don't let my tradesmen bother me. I have never been out of

debt since I can remember; and I don't see why one ever need be. What is the use of dealing with people who charge credit prices, if one has to pay ready money? I give them something on account when I can, and so it goes on. Don't look so solemn. I mean to be a model of parsimony after we are married, and you need not be afraid of our ending in the workhouse. I could point out to you heaps and heaps of people in Beachborough who haven't any more to live upon than we shall have; and besides, you know, Claud, it is not as if these few hundreds were all we had to look forward to for the rest of our lives."

"We must not expect another sixpence during the governor's lifetime," said Claud quickly. "He warned me of that; and he never goes back from his word."

Nina smiled. "That is a *façon de parler*," she observed. "Everybody and everything changes in this world. But, let him be as obstinate as he will, a time must come when you will be better off than you are now. I don't want to shock you, and I'm sure I hope Mr. Gervis may have many years of life before him; still the fact remains that you will probably survive him."

"He is perfectly free to disinherit me,

though; and it is quite on the cards that he may do it, if I act in opposition to his wishes."

"He shall not do that," said Nina with determination. "He dislikes me, I know——"

Claud murmured a faint protest.

"Oh, you need not trouble to contradict me. I discovered his sentiments with regard to me long ago, and I gave up trying to please him, because it was not worth while, and I did not care whether he was pleased or not. But I care now; and I intend that he shall like me. I assure you I can be very fascinating when I give my mind to it."

Claud had no doubt whatever of that. At the same time, he could not help remembering that Varinka was generally held to be among the most fascinating of women.

"You don't know the governor," he remarked. "He is not a bit like anybody else. I would much rather look forward to making a moderate competency by my pen."

"So you will, of course. You are going to be a great man, and I shall be ridiculously proud of you. There really is not the slightest fear of our starving. Now suppose we say no more about money. It is a horrid, vulgar subject, and I hate it, don't you?"

After that, Claud could hardly persist in his

discussion of ways and means. It was, to be sure, a vulgar subject, and he was not unwilling to change it for a pleasanter one.

The moments passed quickly for this happy pair, as they sat in their tumble-down retreat, exchanging those promises and assurances which are as old as the world, and which may very probably have been listened to by many a departed lover in that self-same spot. The wind, rising in gusts, brought down showers of yellow leaves all around them, the gloom of a grey afternoon deepened into twilight, and a chilly mist hung over the lake; but their bodies seemed to have borrowed from their spirits a temporary imperviousness to damp, and they were too much engrossed in one another to notice whether external objects wore a cheerful aspect or otherwise. They spoke of the merry, independent life they would lead together, and agreed that Paris should be their home—Paris being so economical a place of residence, and offering, besides, such exceptional advantages both to literary men and to ladies of limited means who would fain catch some occasional glimpses of the gay world. Small income life in London, as Nina pointed out, meant neither more nor less than social death; whereas, in the French capital, where distances were not

so great and money was less abundant, one could rent a pretty little flat, with a southern aspect, for next to nothing, one could receive one's friends from time to time without spending a fortune on entertaining them, and pass an evening at the *Français* or the *Odéon* for the really nominal price of seven or eight francs a head. Some such mode of existence as was thus vaguely shadowed forth would, she declared, satisfy her utmost aspirations. She didn't want anything more; indeed, when she came to think of it, she was by no means sure that it would not be much better fun to be poor than rich. She was sick to death of English dulness and routine, and longed to make a fresh start under sunnier skies and in brighter circles. Once, when the rumbling of carriage-wheels was heard on the distant drive, she exclaimed gleefully—

"There go some visitors! How thankful I am that I have not got to see them! How thankful I shall be when I know that I need *never* see them again, unless I like! Oh, the joy of saying good-bye to them!—to them, and their tittle-tattle, and their patronage, and their stale news, and their clothing-clubs, and their dreadful assembly-room dances! You don't understand; because you are a man, and can

choose your own friends, and be rude or surly even to them when you happen to be out of humour; but we women must be civil *quand même*, and I can assure you that the amount of suffering we inflict upon one another, and bear stoically, is something almost beyond belief. We won't know any ill-natured old frumps when we are married, will we?" Then, after some time had elapsed, and there was no sound of the carriage returning towards the lodge, she laughed, and exclaimed—"Poor things! I know what has happened to them. Papa has caught them just as they were handing out their cards, and at this moment they are being marched across the damp grass in their thin boots to look at the chrysanthemums. Can't you imagine them cursing and swearing in their hearts, with their faces screwed up into sickly smiles, and ejaculating 'Oh, how *too* lovely! I *do* envy you your garden, Mr. Flemyng! I had no idea chrysanthemums could be so beautiful'—and all the rest of it? Only, you know, that is merely their kindness and politeness; because they had to look at those same plants last year and the year before, and they will have to look at them next year, if they don't die in the meantime. Papa is in his glory, and thinks he is giving them a real treat. Poor

papa! do you remember how angry he was about his dahlias, and how shamefully you behaved in letting that good-for-nothing young Burvill off? I taxed him with his sins the next time I saw him on the beach, and he made used of such language that I fled discomfited. What made you let him off, Claud? I believe he threatened to thrash you unless you did."

Claud laughed. He recollected perfectly the substance of his conversation with Tom Burvill on that memorable evening, and was not over anxious to be cross-questioned upon the subject. "Talking of your father," he remarked, "I suppose I shall have to go through a formal conference with him before long, shall I not? Fathers are rather a bore sometimes, I must confess. What will he say to a pauper son-in-law do you think?"

"Nothing but what is amiable, unless you put it into his head to raise objections. He has not the most remote idea of the value of money, poor old fellow, and if you were to tell him that you could keep a carriage and a couple of saddle-horses on seven hundred a year, I haven't a doubt but that he would believe you. Your best plan would be to take his consent for granted, and to rather imply

that the whole affair was his arranging and that he ought to be very much obliged to you for forwarding his designs."

Claud said he would do his best to carry out this suggestion. He was not, in truth, much afraid of Mr. Flemyng; but a sense of the awkwardness of coupling his formal demand with the admission that he had but a bare sufficiency of means to offer, and that his father was strongly opposed to his marriage, made him anxious to get this bad quarter of an hour over and done with as soon as possible. He confessed as much to Nina, who shrugged her shoulders sympathetically.

"It *is* a nuisance," she agreed; "I wish I could do the business for you. But never mind; it won't last long; and I think I can almost promise you that he will consent without hesitation. The fact is it will be an immense relief to him in many ways to get rid of me."

The sequel, however, showed that Miss Flemyng set too modest a value upon herself, and that her father was by no means so eager to part with her as she had supposed. An hour later Claud was admitted into that gentleman's study, and, instead of being met with the affectionate greeting which his experience

during the last few weeks had entitled him to look for, was requested in grave accents to take a chair, and informed that the honour of his visit had been anticipated.

"I am acquainted with the errand which has brought you here," Mr. Flemyng began; "and I am glad that you have seen fit to address yourself to me without loss of time. Under the circumstances, that was the proper course to adopt, and it enables me to say what otherwise I could hardly have said without some appearance of indelicacy: namely, that I must decline for some time to come to receive you in my house as I have had the pleasure of doing of late."

The philosopher had taken up a commanding position upon the hearth-rug. His cheeks were slightly flushed, and his features bore traces of some recent agitation, ill-concealed under an additional loftiness of mien. Disappointment and mortified vanity might have been plainly read there by any dispassionate observer; but Claud was too pre-occupied with his own affairs to take a calm survey of his host, and saw only that the man was angry. He made an attempt to speak, but was silenced by an imperative gesture.

"Allow me, if you please, a few minutes.

When I tell you that I have just parted from your father, who has been with me during the greater part of the afternoon, you will no doubt understand the situation—I may add the embarrassing and unexpected situation—in which I find myself placed."

Claud's face lengthened, and a subdued whistle escaped from his lips. "So it was the governor's carriage-wheels that we heard," thought he. "He has stolen a march upon me. What a fool I was not to remember the importance of being the first to tickle this solemn old donkey's long ears!"

"What I have heard to-day," continued Mr. Flemyng, all unconscious of the disrespectful reflections that were passing through his would-be son-in-law's mind, "has greatly surprised me. I do not refer to the news of your attachment to my daughter—for you are not to suppose that what has been going on for many weeks past has escaped my observation—but to your father's strongly-expressed opposition to your marriage, and to the means which he has taken to render it impossible. I say advisedly 'impossible;' for upon that point my conviction is as firm and as unalterable as Mr. Gervis's. Whether due consideration has been shown to myself and my daughter in the

matter is a question which I do not care to discuss. I hold a very decided opinion that I ought to have been warned of your father's peculiar views with reference to matrimony; Mr. Gervis, on the contrary, appears to think that it was my part to inform myself of them. As to that we must be content to remain at issue. Mr. Gervis, I am bound to say, has expressed himself with a great deal of courtesy and proper feeling; and there has been nothing in the shape of a breach between us. We are, in short, both men of the world, he and I," observed Mr. Flemyng, with a complacent roll of his head; "which is equivalent to saying that we are able to retain our self-command under every circumstance. I have only to add my hope that the friendly relations which have sprung up between you and my family may not be put an end to by this—untoward event; although, as I hinted to you just now, it may be advisable that they should suffer some temporary interruption."

"I think I shall be able to convince you, Mr. Flemyng," said Claud, "that they need not be interrupted at all, and that we may substitute relationship for friendly relations before long."

"Pardon me, my dear young friend; you will not be able to convince me of anything of

the sort. Let us examine the facts as men of the world and men of common sense. We find ourselves at once in the presence of an insurmountable obstacle—insufficiency of income. Insufficiency of income present and future; for Mr. Gervis gave me distinctly to understand that you would not necessarily be heir even to a portion of his estate. Now I dare say," continued Mr. Flemyng benevolently, "that you, being young, view this subject in a different light from that in which reason obliges me to regard it. Your father has, in fact, prepared me to find you a little vague in your notions of finance. All the more necessary is it that I should use such poor powers as I possess to make your situation clear to you. Many persons in my place would content themselves with simply declining to entertain your proposal; but I take an interest in your welfare, I have a sincere friendship for you, and I should like to feel that I had done what in me lay towards opening your eyes to the complicated conditions of existence in the world which we inhabit."

"You would like to hear yourself talk, you mean," thought Claud; but he bowed, without speaking, and bided his time patiently.

Then Mr. Flemyng cleared his voice, and

embarked upon a dissertation which lasted for twenty minutes, from start to finish, without a check. Claud, giving an account of the interview in later years, declared that this dreadful old man traced the history of marriage from its origin in the garden of Eden down to the present day, glancing briefly at the facility of maintaining a large family in the time of the patriarchs, stating, in a parenthesis, some excellent reasons for the incompatibility of polygamy with a high state of civilization, alluding to the laws and customs relating to matrimony which prevailed at Athens and Sparta, distinguishing between the Roman *materfamilias* and *uxor*, passing lightly over the invasion of the barbarians to the rise and decay of the feudal system and the state of domestic institutions under the Renaissance, devoting a few sentences to the Reformation, to Puritanism and to the subsequent laxity of morals characteristic of the latter part of the seventeenth and the whole of the eighteenth centuries, and so, after a compendious survey of the influence of the revolutionary era upon society, reaching his conclusion that seven hundred a year was not enough to support a middle-class couple in the reign of Queen Victoria. The recipient of all this stored-up wisdom confessed that his atten-

tion wandered a good deal during its delivery, and that he was entirely at a loss to make any reply to the orator until a passing observation of Mr. Flemyng's to the effect that Nina's husband must not look for anything in the shape of settlements afforded him the opportunity of striking in with—

"My dear sir, I assure you I never dreamt of such a thing. The fact is that, with care, we shall be able to live perfectly well upon what we have, and neither of us expects or asks for more."

Mr. Flemyng wagged his head, and smiled with compassionate superiority. "Have you gone into this matter?" he asked. "Have you any idea of the purchasing power of money, or of the cost of the necessaries of life?"

"I know that lots of people marry upon less than seven hundred a year," answered Claud.

"Unquestionably. But what will enable A. to live in comfort may be found wholly inadequate to the wants of B., and in judging of the means requisite to support two given persons, we have to take into consideration the surroundings to which those two persons have been accustomed. And in this connection I may remind you that even the law has held

a husband liable for such articles as jewellery supplied to his wife, under the head of necessaries."

"I thought that depended upon the husband's income," said Claud.

"I am not contemplating the probable result of an action brought against you by your wife's creditors: my allusion was merely intended to show the elasticity of the word 'necessaries,' and to point out the prudence of discovering what meaning any lady may attach to that word before leading her to the altar. Now I happen to be in possession of certain data which may assist us in forming a definite judgment in the present instance. I hold in my hand,"—here Mr. Flemyng dived into his coat-tail pocket, produced from thence a sheaf of papers, and fixing his double eye-glasses on his nose, proceeded:—"I hold in my hand sundry documents, which, to my mind, contain evidence of an absolutely convincing nature. They are—not to waste more words upon it—bills. Bills from milliners, dressmakers, bootmakers, and other tradesmen, which have been sent in to me at various times during the last few years, and which—which, in short, I have had to pay," concluded Mr. Flemyng, pulling a rather wry face. "Since your father left

me," he resumed, "I have been going into these figures a little; and although, owing to the irregularity with which the bills have been furnished, and to the circumstance that every one of them begins with the item 'Account rendered,' I have found it difficult to form a strictly accurate estimate of my daughter's annual expenditure, I have calculated that it cannot be set down at a lower figure than two hundred and fifty pounds."

Mr. Flemyng looked over his glasses at Claud to see what effect had been produced by this alarming statement; but as the young man only smiled slightly, he returned to the contemplation of a memorandum to which he had already referred. "Now," said he, briskly, "let us endeavour to make a rough summary of your needs and hers and compare it with the means at your disposal. Two hundred and fifty pounds we have accounted for. Your own allowance for dress, tobacco, and so on I should put at——"

"Fifty pounds a year," said Claud with decision.

"A hundred and fifty, at the very least. House-rent, with rates and taxes, another hundred and fifty—certainly not too high a figure. Wages for three servants, sixty pounds;

doctor's bill, journeys, and other incidental expenses, say a hundred and fifty pounds again. Now, taking your income, together with the hundred a year which I propose to allow to Nina when she marries, at eight hundred, you will find, after adding up these items, that there will remain to you exactly forty pounds per annum upon which to defray the cost of food, wine, lighting, and coals. *Quod est absurdum.*"

Mr. Flemyng thrust the papers back into his pocket, and rubbed his hands with a certain quiet triumph. "Nothing so convincing as figures," he observed.

"I have heard it said that there is nothing so misleading," replied Claud. "But at any rate your conclusions must be worthless, because you start from false premisses. Because we have spent a good deal of money in the past, it does not at all follow that we must needs do so in the future. One cuts one's coat according to one's cloth. I don't pretend to have studied details as yet; but I think I could easily make a rough calculation of our expenditure which would be quite as trustworthy as yours. For instance, one ought to be able to get a very good little house for a rent of fifty pounds. Well, let us say, rent, rates, and

taxes, seventy; dress, a hundred; wages, fifty; doctor, twenty; household expenses, at five pounds a week, two hundred and sixty: total five hundred. That leaves us with a margin of three hundred for contingencies."

It is needless to follow the course of the dispute which ensued between the two economists. The one knew as much of his subject as the other; so that in one sense they started upon tolerably even terms; but it is easier to defend than to attack a position, and this told against Claud. Moreover, the fruits of Mr. Gervis's visit became apparent in more ways than one; and when the argument died away from sheer lack of material to keep it going, our young friend found that he had gained no advantage, save that of having restored his opponent to good humour. For Mr. Flemyng, who loved a discussion above all things, had almost forgotten his wrongs in the pleasure of displaying his stock of varied knowledge, and when he shook hands with Claud, and bade him good-bye, went so far as to express a hope that they might meet again soon.

"May I understand, then, that you do not forbid me your house?" inquired the latter.

Mr. Flemyng, with some warmth, declared himself incapable of such discourtesy.

"And may I see Miss Flemyng as usual?"

"Ah—well—h'm! I hardly know what to say to that. In the presence of a third person —yes."

"But, my dear Mr. Flemyng, you cannot refuse me one last meeting with her. I will not ask for more."

"Be it so. Remember, however, only one. I am not sure that I am wise——"

But Claud cut him short with a profusion of thanks, and escaped adroitly before his host had time to retract this unwilling concession. And as he walked back towards Southlands in the dark, he said to himself that if Nina would but remain true to him, neither her father nor his should keep them long asunder.

CHAPTER VIII.

PERVERSITY.

Claud took his place at the dinner-table that night with the consciousness of a novel sensation of embarrassment. All the summer through, he had come and gone as the fancy had happened to take him, living almost as much at the Moated House as at Southlands, rendering no account of his actions in the home circle, and not concerning himself at all with the opinions which might have been formed upon them there. Nina Flemyng alone had occupied his thoughts, to the exclusion of all less important subjects. But now for the first time—why or wherefore signifies little—he was beginning to emerge somewhat from his self-engrossment, and an uneasy conviction forced itself upon him that he was thought to have made a fool of himself. He suspected, too, that the occurrences of the day were no secret either to Geneviève or to Miss Potts. The

former, he noticed, was very silent and looked sad, while the countenance of the latter wore an expression of almost ludicrous concern. No one could have told them all that had happened since the morning; but these domestic events have a mysterious way of making themselves felt, and it seemed to Claud that everybody knew all about it. He could not help fancying that even the servants glanced at him, every now and again, with an air of slightly derisive commiseration.

All this was trivial enough as regarded its influence upon his future line of conduct; but it made him uncomfortable at the time, and served to increase the general feeling of constraint. It is true that Mr. Gervis's customary placidity showed no signs of disturbance; but Mr. Gervis could do little towards setting any member of his household at ease without Claud's aid, and probably the two ladies were not sorry to seize the first opportunity of effecting their escape.

Our hero hardly knew what to do or say on finding himself alone once more with his father. Should he make any allusion to the topic of which both of them must needs be thinking? Ought he to announce the news of Nina's constancy and the discouraging issue of his

appeal to Mr. Flemyng, and to reiterate his determination to have his own way, in spite of all opposition? Or would it be wiser to remain quiescent, and allow the enemy to fire the first shot, should he be so minded? The *Pall Mall Gazette*, which was brought in at this moment with the coffee, relieved him from embarrassment. Mr. Gervis took up the paper, lighted a cigarette, and began to read out the latest intelligence bearing upon the Eastern question, interspersing these extracts with occasional laconic comments of his own. He observed that the establishment of a Greek empire at Constantinople would have to be the ultimate solution of the problem; he gave his impressions of the Hellenic character, grounded upon an official residence of some years' duration at Athens, related an anecdote or two of the late King Otho, and remarked upon the various difficulties which seemed likely to disturb the peace of Europe for a considerable period yet to come. All this in his usual languid accents, and without apparent preoccupation on the score of difficulties nearer home. After a time, he turned to the leading article and relapsed into silence; and Claud, having finished his coffee, rose, and left the room.

Southlands is a house rather overdone with what the house-agents call "noble reception-rooms." There are too many of them for the requirements of a small party of inmates; they are too large to be kept warm by means of open fire-places, and there are no hot-water pipes in the house—or, at least, were none when its present owner came into possession of it. At this time neither he nor any of his family made use of the drawing-room—a vast and cheerless apartment in which the gaudy upholstery of thirty years ago still survived intact—but chose in preference to sit in the library, where there was less of pretension and more of home-like comfort. Thither Claud betook himself, and finding it unoccupied, drew a chair up to the fire, and taking a volume of Goethe which he found lying open on the table, tried to forget his sorrows for a time in perusing those of Werther. He soon, however, became aware that this would not do. He was not in the humour for reading, and the crabbed text and involved German construction irritated him. He tossed Goethe impatiently aside, and after wandering about the room for a while, examining the bookcases, and wondering aloud what the deuce Gen and Miss Potts were doing with themselves, decided at last to go in search of those ladies.

Once in the hall, a far-away echo of music gave him a clue to their whereabouts. He followed the sound, and passed into a long corridor hung with paintings, at the end of which, shut off by a heavy curtain, was an octagon room, built by old Colonel Gervis for the reception of a marble group of Diana and Actæon which he had bought in Italy as a genuine piece of ancient sculpture, and had transported to England at an enormous outlay. Competent authorities having subsequently cast some doubt upon the authenticity of this work of art, the old gentleman, in a fit of passion, had ordered his costly purchase to be broken up into fragments and carted away out of sight. The pedestal which had once supported it remained, and was found useful as a support for her music-stand by Geneviève, who had appropriated the little octagon room for practising purposes, as being remote from the rest of the house and beyond the range of fastidious ears.

Claud groped his way along the dark gallery towards the streak of light which escaped from beneath the curtain at the end of it. A most singular and confused medley of sound rushed out to meet him as he advanced—a quick succession of running passages, breaking into

chords, jostled by sharp dissonances—a hurly-burly in the midst of which a few bars of some well-known composition emerged here and there, like straws upon the surface of a torrent, and lost themselves again. It was as if the unseen violinist had raised some harmonious imp to assist her in her art—as Tartini once invoked the devil, they say—and was playing in obedience to a will other than her own, vainly struggling to eliminate from this whirlwind of sound germs of some fit utterance for her thoughts. But on a sudden chaos took shape; the capricious strokes of the bow ceased, and there rang out clearly and firmly into the stillness the first notes of an air which Claud knew well. It was a marching song, composed in honour of Pio Nono, the liberal pope, by I know not what enthusiastic Roman, and frequently chanted by a sanguine people during those brief halycon days of 1847 when the dream of an Italian Italy had seemed on the verge of fulfilment. Geneviève and her brother had heard the chorus sung scores of times in Paris, where the Princess Ouranoff's doors were ever open to exiles of all nationalities. Probably it had maintained its place in the hearts and on the lips of some of those gentlemen less on account of the sentiments it

breathed—which, indeed, have been somewhat discredited by later developments of history—than by reason of its triumphant, jubilant melody—a true song of liberty, irrepressible as the carol of a sky-lark, wild as the free winds that sweep the Alban hills, and soft as the fathomless blue above them. But surely never before had voice or instrument lent that stirring strain such meaning as it borrowed now from Geneviève's violin. The measured chords started with a swelling *crescendo,* melted into subdued ecstasy, and gathering volume, rolled onwards like the sound of many waters, rising, falling, filling the air with a hundred sweet vibrations and cadences, and striking the listener in the darkness outside with a sort of pleased amazement.

"Something must have made her very happy, that she can play like that," was the comment that came into his mind.

He had been standing close to the curtain for some minutes: he put it gently aside now, and peeped in. The little bare room was lighted only by the candles on the music-stand; the two women had their backs turned to him. Geneviève was standing upright, a long cloak thrown back from her shoulders; Miss Potts, seated beside her on a low camp-chair, was

swaying to and fro in a kind of decorous rapture infinitely ludicrous to behold. Her head, her hands, and her feet marked time noiselessly; her long ringlets swung from side to side; her profile flung the strangest and most grotesque shadows upon the white wall. It was hard upon the poor lady that Nature should have made her capable of enthusiasm and denied to her person that grace which enthusiasm can only augment; but as she could not guess that anybody was looking at her, her enjoyment, let us hope, was not marred by any consciousness of her physical deficiencies.

"Go on, my child, go on," she entreated, when at length the strains, growing softer and softer, died away, as though the last marchers in some triumphal procession had filed past; "you transport me to paradise!" And Geneviève, without a word, drew her bow across the strings once more.

Again that strange, harmonious jumble arose —fragments of symphonies, echoes of waltzes, mazes of sound without name or form, while Miss Potts, a little puzzled in her efforts to keep time to a timeless measure, performed a kind of voluntary St. Vitus's dance. A queer performance and a queer couple.

Claud watched them with increasing curiosity.

Presently a light touch on his arm made him start violently. It was his father who stood beside him, his finger on his lips. Claud moved silently to one side, and the older man peered through the aperture. Thus for ten minutes or more the fantastic solo went on before an augmented audience. Finally Geneviève let her violin drop from her shoulder, exclaiming—

"There! that is enough. We will go back to the library now. Miss Potts, you must be frozen to death."

"Oh no, indeed I am not," cried Miss Potts; "I am quite hot. They will not miss us, and it is not nearly bed-time yet. Please don't stop."

But Mr. Gervis let the curtain fall, and stole away, signing to his son to follow him; and the two listeners effected their retreat unheard.

Mr. Gervis led the way to the billiard-room, which was always lighted at night, though seldom used, and taking down a cue from the rack, "Are you inclined for a game?" he asked.

Claud said, "Yes, if you are."

"Light your cigar then, and I will see what I can do with you. You must allow me some-

thing; I have not played a game of billiards for years. I will take ten points."

Mr. Gervis made no allusion to the scene they had just witnessed until several additions had been made to his score. Then he paused, in the act of delivering a stroke, and looking up, said abruptly—

"Well; what does all that say to you?"

"Geneviève's playing, do you mean? I don't know, I'm sure. I have never heard her play like that before. It is extraordinary—it is a great power. It shows that she must have practised a great deal more than we supposed."

"Oh, that is what it shows you? It showed me a little more, I fancy. For one thing, that the girl has, what you, saving your presence, have not—genius."

"I am delighted to hear you say so," cried Claud magnanimously. "As for me, I never pretended to genius, nor imagined for a moment that I had any."

"Oh, you are clever," said Gervis, nodding at him; "you have a very pretty talent. The world may hear of you some day;—but then again it may not. That girl, if she had to earn her own living, would become famous. Her performance was absurd; it was not

violin-playing; it was not music, properly speaking. But there was genius in every note of it. And there was something else, plain enough to me, but not to you, I suppose—perversity. She will give trouble to herself and her friends, I suspect, if she lives long enough. For the rest, you may have already discovered, without musical aid, that your sister is a perverse person."

"I don't know that I should have called her that," said Claud, meditatively. "Prejudiced, perhaps."

"Especially as regards a certain individual who shall be nameless, eh? Let us not blame her on that account; you know, there are so many people who share her opinion. I was saying that she is a perverse genius. Odd, that she should be anything of the kind! I can't tell where she got her temperament from. Not from me certainly; for if ever there was a humdrum, unremarkable family, we Gervises belong to it. It is the Italian strain of blood, I suppose, which is an old one, and must have picked up all kinds of stray ingredients in the process of its development. Your mother was assuredly no genius; but, on the other hand, she was well provided with—some other qualities which I can detect in your sister. Upon my

word, when I think of what the vices of her family were, and compare them with certain of my own little hereditary failings, I feel that I owe you both a sincere apology for having married her. And I really believe," continued Mr. Gervis, moving away from the table, and seating himself upon an adjacent sofa, "that if people realized the discomfort they were bringing upon unborn generations by injudicious cross-breeding, three-fourths of the population would become so deucedly cautious and timorous that they would live and die single. Which would be an excellent thing in every way. Let me recommend the subject to your consideration."

"Governor," said Claud, abruptly and somewhat irrelevantly, "what made you go over and set old Flemyng against me this afternoon?"

"My dear fellow, what a very absurd question! Did I not tell you—mark that miss up to me, please—did I not tell you that I meant to use every reasonable means of preventing you from spoiling your career? I counted, and count still, upon the young lady's good sense; but it seemed as well to make assurance doubly sure by frightening the father. You ought, of course, to have secured his ear before me. Why didn't you?"

"I never thought of it," answered Claud, innocently. "But you were wrong about Nina. She laughed at the idea of our being too poor to marry."

"Did she indeed? In that case, I have the consolation of knowing that I did not spend a very wearisome afternoon to no purpose. There is also room for disinterested satisfaction in the thought that, some day or other, you will be thankful to me for the trouble I have taken. Another miss!—and look what you have left me! This ought to be final."

"That makes you game, governor," said Claud, as Mr. Gervis, after putting down the red twice in succession, scored a rather clever five stroke.

"One can win most games," observed his father serenely, "if one keeps cool, and does not care at all whether one wins or loses."

"It is a better plan still to be determined to win," thought Claud, following his late antagonist out of the room. It was not yet quite clear to him by what means he should get the better of that unimpassioned player as regarded the more important contest in which they were engaged; but that he should eventually do so he had no doubt, and this, he felt, was half the battle. He revolved many inchoate projects in

his mind before going to sleep that night, but adjourned further consideration of them all until such time as he should have held a consultation with Nina, to whose mother-wit and fertility of resource he trusted more than to his own.

That this confidence was not misplaced he had ample proof on the following morning, when he betook himself to the Moated House to claim that last private interview which Mr. Flemyng's good nature had conceded. Nina, so far from being cast down by her father's unforeseen hostility, was in one of her brightest moods, and professed herself quite confident of being able to out-general the allied forces. Nothing could be clearer or more business-like than her review of the situation.

"Mr. Gervis we may look upon as disposed of," said she. "That is, if you are quite certain that he will not stop your allowance under any circumstances."

"Yes, I am quite certain of that," answered Claud.

"Very well, then; *he* can't prevent our marrying. Papa, of course, can—at least, he can make it practically impossible for us to be married from this house in the orthodox way. But his power begins and ends there. All that

we have to do is to be true to one another; and then, after a little bother—you don't mind a little bother, do you?"

It is superfluous to put Claud's reply on record.

"Well, it will not be very great, nor last very long. I have been thinking it all over, and I have come to the conclusion that the only thing to be done is to make a clean bolt for it, and confront our revered parents with an accomplished fact."

"What! run away?" ejaculated Claud, not a little startled by the suddenness of the proposition.

Nina threw herself back in her chair, and laughed with much apparent enjoyment. "How rude you are!" she cried. "Wasn't it enough to throw the burden upon me of making a suggestion which really ought to have come from you; or are you going to cover me with humiliation by raising objections to my plan?"

"How can you say such things? You took my breath away a little, that was all. I expected——"

"What? That I should advise you to go away and travel for five years, promising to remain in strict seclusion in the meantime, upon the chance of your majesty's continuing con-

stant? Or that I should recommend our addressing *trois sommations respectueuses* to our cruel parents, as they do in France, and getting our own way at last by dint of sheer pertinacity? I couldn't attempt to face all the worry and opposition that that implies. I should break down before a month was out. What I told you yesterday was only too true; there's no stability about me. Oh, Claud, I am not nearly good enough for you; and if you were not infatuated, you would see it. Anyhow, being what I am, I must be taken now or not at all—middle courses won't do. An elopement or a final parting, which is it to be? I know which you will choose if you are wise."

Wisely or unwisely, Claud's choice was soon made. He was full of happiness and gratitude, and quite prepared to concur in any scheme which Nina might advocate. "Only wouldn't it be better, before we decide on doing anything, to make one more attempt at talking Mr. Flemyng over?"

Nina shook her head. "I have been talking to him the whole morning," she said, "and it has been all wasted breath. Mr. Gervis seems to have scared him by some means or other, and he won't listen to reason. After all,

a runaway match will be rather fun in some ways," she added musingly. "All I shall regret will be the having no trousseau; wedding presents I can forego without a pang. I am one of those unfortunates who have an enormous acquaintance, and not one good, solid, old-fashioned friend who might be counted upon to come down with a grand-piano or a cheque for a hundred pounds; and you know the sort of frightful things people give one nowadays—horrid, cheap ink-stands and monstrosities in modern china, and all kinds of abominations in imitation oxydized silver—it is a positive relief to think that one's house will not be choked up with all that trash. My trousseau I confess that I do grieve over; but I suppose the best way will be for me to order the few rags I shall want afterwards; and if papa has a spark of proper feeling, he will insist upon paying the bills."

Claud was too happy to be alarmed at the ominous vista which this incidental hint might have revealed to more experienced eyes. In Nina's willingness to dispense with those accompaniments of the marriage ceremony which are supposed to be especially dear to women he saw a proof, not only of her superiority to the rest of her sex, but of her truly disinterested

love for him; and he felt, and said, that he could never be sufficiently thankful to her, or cease to wonder at his good fortune.

His attention, indeed, was so fully engaged with asseverations of this description, and with the answers and rejoinders that naturally flowed from them, that very nearly an hour slipped away before he began to think of arranging the details of the proposed flight. Then it was that he recollected, with a shock of dismay, that the days of Gretna Green were over. "Good Heavens! what shall we do?" he exclaimed. "I am almost sure that we can't be married anywhere, unless our banns have been called in church, and we have resided for a certain number of weeks in the parish. Did you think about that?"

Nina confessed that this necessity, if it existed, had escaped her memory. Upon reflection, she believed that there was some stupid rule of the kind. Yes; no doubt that would explain why one never heard of people running away now—except, of course, married people. How too tiresome! But wasn't there such a thing as a special licence? Or had a vexatious legislature done away with that convenience too? Luckily, the room in which this plot was hatching happened to adjoin Mr. Flemyng's study,

whither a move was now made with the view of consulting the laws of the land as to matrimony. "Stephen's Commentaries" was dragged from its shelf and the chapter relating to marriage duly referred to. Owing, however, partly to a nervous dread of Mr. Flemyng's sudden entrance and partly to the provoking diffuseness of the learned Blackstone and his commentators, the whole subject appeared to our conspirators to be involved in some obscurity; the one thing manifest being that nobody could very well get married in England without a considerable amount of dangerous publicity. Under these circumstances, Nina, who had no idea of allowing a pack of pedantic lawyers to frustrate her designs, was of opinion that some foreign country might offer greater facilities—at all events as regarded secrecy—than the United Kingdom.

"I'll tell you what you must do," said she, as soon as she and her lover were safely seated by the fireside once more; "you must run over to Port Ste. Marie in the yacht, and see the consul there. You can find out all particulars from him, without anybody knowing anything about it; and if it turns out that our names have to be stuck up in his office for a week, it won't much matter. At least, it would be an extraordinary

piece of bad luck if anybody who knew us happened to see them there. Yes; of course that will be much the best way; I wonder I did not think of it before. I know there is an English clergyman at Port Ste. Marie; and it will be ever so much jollier to be married in France, won't it? We can go straight to Paris, and look out for rooms at once. What fun it will all be!"

This last ejaculation really seemed to convey the impression that was uppermost in her mind. She was lying back in her low chair, fanning herself lazily with a fire-screen, and discussing an elopement from her father's house with no more apparent anxiety than if it had been a pic-nic that she was organizing. Claud could not help wishing that she were a little more serious, and wondering whether she realized the importance of the plunge that she was about to take. She answered his unspoken thought at once.

"For goodness' sake, don't put such a grave face upon it! You will have plenty of time to look grave in the years that are coming—yes; and to repent too, I dare say. We shall only be young once. I want to enjoy it all—every bit of it—the fun of the thing, with the rest. Can't you understand?"

Claud was not quite sure that he could. He said, however, that her enjoyment would be his happiness, then and always, and for the rest, agreed with her that their hopes seemed to have the best chance of fulfilment through the medium of the consul at Port Ste. Marie.

"The secrecy of it is the only thing that worries me a little," he confessed at last. "You see, the governor has always been open and above-board with me; and if I were to find myself so placed that I could hardly avoid telling him lies——"

"Then, my dear, stupid boy, you would have to tell them. The sin of a lie consists in deceit, doesn't it? But deceive we must, so it can't matter much whether it is our words or only our acts that are untrue. It's an unpleasant necessity—neither more nor less. For the next few weeks you will have to come here every now and then—not too often, you know—and you will have to look as dejected as you can, and to be driven to take short voyages from time to time, in order to distract your thoughts. You mustn't let Mr. Gervis send you away; but you might, to keep him quiet, let fall occasional hints that you do not look forward to spending the winter here. As for our meeting, you must leave that to me; I shall be able to

discover some safe way of managing it. And now the time has really come for us to bid each other an eternal farewell. If you meet papa, try to look as if you had been dissolved in tears."

The effect of all this was that Claud, despite his bliss, appeared at dinner that night with so hang-dog an expression of countenance as to completely allay any fears that may still have disturbed Mr. Gervis's peace, and to distress the tender-hearted Potts to that degree that she could scarcely manage to eat anything at all.

CHAPTER IX.

PORT STE. MARIE.

A LINE drawn due south from the pier-heads at Beachborough across some hundred miles or so of sea would fall as nearly as possible upon the town and harbour of Port Ste. Marie, a *chef-lieu d'arrondissement* of the department of the Calvados, containing, according to the last census, 9753 inhabitants, exclusive of 1500 English operatives, employed in the factories of the *banlieue*. Port Ste. Marie is little visited by tourists, having few attractions to offer to persons in search of the novel or beautiful, except a fine Norman church and some scanty vestiges of an ancient keep frowning above the tall white houses of the modern town. Its denizens, though sharing in the general picturesqueness of the fishing population of northern France, possess nothing distinctive in the way of physique or costume,

while the primitive nature of its sanitary arrangements is apt to thrust itself somewhat disagreeably upon the attention of the traveller. What could have induced Mr. Claud to shape his course for this uninteresting and evil-smelling spot when he might just as well have steered for Cherbourg or Hâvre, was more than Mr. Evans, the master of the *Siren*, could understand; but Evans, whom many years' experience had accustomed to the eccentric movements of his employers, was a well-paid, easy-going, good-natured person, and he consoled himself with the reflection that at least there was no "dratted bar" at the entrance of the Port Ste. Marie harbour, and that the town must certainly contain some *café-chantant* at which he could kill time, so soon as he should have got his vessel safely alongside of the quay and made all snug for the night.

Claud himself was willing enough to condone the defective civilization of the little town in consideration of the privacy which it afforded. Landing early in the morning, after a long and rather rough passage, he was delighted to perceive that among the crowd which had collected on the wooden pier to see the yacht come in there was not a single well-dressed individual, much less an Englishman. Consciousness of

guilt had so acted upon his nerves that the mere sight of a fellow-countryman would have made him fancy that all was discovered, and it was a positive relief to him to learn that Her Britannic Majesty's representative was not of his own nationality.

"*M. le consul anglais?*" said the smooth-shaven waiter at the Hôtel de Paris in answer to his inquiry; "that must be M. l'Hérisson. Hé! Jean—Pierre! it is M. l'Hérisson, is it not, who is consul for everybody?"

And a shrill voice replying from some unseen quarter in the affirmative, Claud's informant, who was in the act of serving him with an ample, if somewhat over-unctuous breakfast, proceeded: "Perfectly. Monsieur has only to take the first turn to the left, on leaving the hotel, and follow the rue des Cordeliers, which mounts the hill. Monsieur will see the coat-of-arms at the entrance of No. 16. M. l'Hérisson lives on the second floor."

Following these directions, Claud soon reached a gateway adorned not with one, but with many coats-of-arms. There were the stars and stripes of the United States, the spread eagle of Germany, the white cross of Italy, and numerous other well-known devices on neat little shields, our own glorious lion and unicorn

finding a humble position between the kingdom of Denmark and the republic of Guatemala. Evidently the waiter had been guilty of no exaggeration in describing M. l'Hérisson as "the consul for everybody;" and it was a striking proof of the parsimony with which governments are wont to treat their agents abroad that this pluralist should have been driven to seek a lodging on the second floor above the entresol, with two milliners and a wine merchant beneath him.

Claud climbed the dirty, creaking stairs, and was presently ushered into an uncarpeted office containing three or four rush-bottomed chairs, a large writing-table, a number of tin boxes, and very little else. M. le Consul was breakfasting, the old *bonne* who admitted him said; and, upon Claud's expressing a polite wish that her master might not be disturbed, answered reassuringly, with a short laugh, "*Il ne se dérangera pas, allez!*"

Indeed the would-be bridegroom had to wait a good half-hour before the door slowly opened to admit a stout, sleepy-looking personage and a fine whiff of garlic and *pot-au-feu*. M. l'Hérisson advanced deliberately, wiping his lips with a large pocket-handkerchief. Probably he had not expected to encounter a

visitor of Claud's distinguished appearance; for he made a low bow and muttered a sort of apology. They had not told him who it was that was waiting. People were always coming to bother him at all hours of the day upon the most shallow pretexts. "If it is for a permission to view the fortifications, monsieur, I regret to be unable to procure it for you. The authorities——"

Claud explained that it was a matter of personal business that had brought him to M. l'Hérisson's office. "I believe," said he, "that marriages between British subjects abroad are generally solemnized in the presence of the resident consul. Have you ever been called upon to perform such a ceremony?"

M. l'Hérisson, who had seated himself behind the writing-table, and was taking a pinch of snuff, smiled—the long, slow smile of obesity. "Hundreds!" he answered. "We have here quite a population of your compatriots—monsieur is, I presume, an Englishman, though he speaks with a Parisian accent—a population of operatives. All that marries itself perpetually, has children, demands to be domiciled in France and to escape all taxes and liabilities—it is incredible, the trouble that one has with

them! Monsieur is perhaps interested in two of these persons?"

Claud did not much enjoy the process of stating his business; but he had rehearsed the scene beforehand, and was determined that he would not be shamefaced over it.

"It is my own marriage that I wish to be performed in your presence, M. l'Hérisson," he said. "Here is my card. I have called upon you to make the necessary arrangements and to inquire what are the formalities to be gone through in these cases. For reasons, with which I need not trouble you—family reasons—I and my future wife desire to be married quietly in a quiet place; and we have fixed upon Port Ste. Marie as being a town in which our privacy is not likely to be intruded upon. I trust that you will see no objection to gratifying this—little whim of ours."

M. l'Hérisson had adjusted a pair of silver-rimmed spectacles upon his nose, and after examining Claud's card through them and then surveying the speaker over them, passed his hand once or twice across a vast and stubby chin before he replied. Doubtless he was able to form a pretty shrewd guess at the nature of the business which he was being asked to carry through, and it may have occurred to him

that the result of it might not improbably be that he should get himself into trouble.

"Provided," said he at length, "that certain conditions are fulfilled, I have no authority to make objections. I beg you to observe, M. Gervisse, that I ask for no information. I do my duty as consul, upon your demand, and I cannot be made to incur any responsibility, beyond certifying that the parties are duly qualified to contract a matrimonial engagement, and that the requisitions of the law have been complied with. If, for example—pardon me the illustration—you should have taken it into your head to marry your *femme de ménage*, no blame could at any future time attach to me for having enabled you to do what your family might not approve of."

"That is quite understood," answered Claud; "and I will undertake that you shall incur no annoyance whatever. Also I assure you that I am not going to marry the *femme de ménage*, but a lady in my own rank of life. Now as to those conditions that you mentioned."

"I am empowered," said M. l'Hérisson in a gabbling, monotonous voice, as if determined to act as far as possible the part of an automaton, "to grant a licence for a marriage, and to solemnize the same, seven days after having

received due notice of one of the contracting parties having been resident not less than fifteen days in the district to which I am accredited as consul."

"Three weeks! that will be confoundedly inconvenient," muttered Claud.

M. l'Hérisson proceeded, without noticing the aside—"Which notice must comprise a solemn declaration that there is no lawful hindrance or impediment to the marriage, and that, where one of the parties is under age, the consent of the person or persons whose consent is required by the law has been given. Such, monsieur, is the course of procedure in the case of marriages with licence. Marriages without licence, for which the fees are somewhat lower, can only be solemnized after notice of both the contracting parties having been resident in the place for a period of seven days; and this notice must be posted in the consulate, in a conspicuous position, during twenty-one successive days——"

"Thank you; that wouldn't do at all; we needn't trouble about that," interrupted Claud. "There doesn't seem to be very much difficulty about the matter. I understand you, then, that I shall have to take up my abode at Port Ste. Marie for three weeks. There is no way of getting out of that obligation, I suppose?"

M. l'Hérisson shook his head solemnly.

"Well; it is a nuisance; but it can't be helped. I am much indebted to you for your information, monsieur, and I will make the proper declaration when the time comes. As to the religious ceremony, there is, I believe, an English resident clergyman here."

"Without doubt: the reverend Higgins—rue du Temple, No. 3—an excellent man! In the exercise of my functions with regard to British subjects, I am in the habit of paying special attention to the recommendations of the reverend Higgins. It is he who interests himself in the welfare of his compatriots: I, you understand—I am but a machine. Go and see this good Higgins, M. Gervisse: he will give you paternal counsels. For me—if I may take the liberty, as an old man, of addressing a word of caution to a young one—I would remind you that there is not in this world a more easy thing to gain, nor a more troublesome thing to possess, nor a more difficult thing to get rid of, than a wife."

And with this abominable apophthegm M. l'Hérisson took another pinch of snuff, and bowed his visitor out.

Claud went down the stairs, laughing. Except as regarded that tiresome *sine quâ non*

of a three weeks' sojourn at Port Ste. Marie, things seemed to be shaping themselves in a fairly satisfactory manner, and he was not altogether sorry that the consul should have divined the nature of the services required of him, since it was evident that that fat and lazy personage might be counted upon not to give information to the young lady's friends, or to make himself otherwise obnoxious in the matter. It remained to be seen whether the parson would prove equally complaisant.

Mr. Higgins was not to be found at his residence, and had to be pursued into the dingy suburb inhabited by his flock, where, after a long and tortuous chase, he was at length run down, hurrying from house to house, with a bundle of books under one arm and a large packet of tea under the other. He was a small, sandy-haired man, with a kind, ugly face, whose rusty pepper-and-salt suit, broad white neck-cloth and straw hat seemed to proclaim him a member of the moderate evangelical sub-division. "Just the sort of good, conscientious creature who might think it his duty to throw the fat in the fire," thought Claud, taking a few rapid mental notes of his new acquaintance. "Clearly this is a case for a little righteous dissimulation."

To hoodwink worthy Mr. Higgins was no very difficult task; and it only cost our young Machiavelli a contribution of ten pounds towards the church restorations and a patient half-hour's audience of the sufferings of the English poor at Port Ste. Marie to establish himself firmly in the pastor's good graces. The impression conveyed to the mind of the latter was that his interlocutor was a wealthy and benevolent man, whom eccentricity, or, more properly speaking, good sense, had impelled to give his friends the slip, and to celebrate his wedding *sub rosâ* in a foreign land, thus escaping those dreary nuptial festivities which in England would have been unavoidable. With subtle candour, Claud made no secret either of his own name and address or of those of the young lady to whom he was engaged; but it is to be feared that, in mentioning Southlands and the yacht which Mr. Higgins had seen entering the harbour that morning, he omitted to explain that these desirable possessions were not his own property. He had made all the needful arrangements for his marriage, he said, with the consul, before whom, as he understood, the only legal contract could be entered into. "But," he added, "we shall wish to have the usual religious rite afterwards."

"I should hope so indeed!" cried Mr. Higgins, slightly scandalized.

"That is a matter of course; and therefore, my dear sir, we shall probably claim your kind offices in about a month's time. I will let you know the exact date on my return. In the meantime, I hope we shall see a good deal of one another. Perhaps you and Mrs. Higgins would pardon a bachelor's rough fare, and dine with me on board the yacht this evening?"

From all this it will be perceived how readily our fallen nature lends itself to the practice of double-dealing, and with what ease a naturally sensitive conscience may be stifled after a first lapse from the straight path of veracity. Mr. and Mrs. Higgins were entertained that night on board the *Siren* at a highly *recherché* little dinner, to which, by an after-thought, M. l'Herisson was also bidden; and Claud set sail for England on the following morning with the pleasant conviction that he was leaving none but friends and well-wishers behind him.

He was not asked at Southlands for any more information about his cruise than he chose to volunteer. It was generally understood in the household that he was suffering under a heavy disappointment, which, however

salutary it might prove to be for him in the long run, demanded on all hands forbearance for the time being; and there was a tacit agreement that he was to be allowed to recover himself in his own way, and that no one was to interfere with his movements or worry him with questions. Under ordinary circumstances, Geneviève might have evinced something more than silent sympathy with her brother; but at this especial time Geneviève happened to be a good deal taken up with matters affecting her own destiny—which matters both Lady Croft and Freddy took care that she should not forget.

It was the opinion of those who knew Freddy best that their poor friend was very far gone indeed. That he should follow Miss Gervis about like a dog proved nothing; he had followed so many ladies about in similar fashion upon former occasions. But when he was found, one morning, poring over a volume of Browning's poems, with ruffled hair and a rueful and distraught countenance, and could give no other explanation of this astonishing conduct than that a fellow really ought to improve his mind, you know; and when, without assigning any reason whatever, he actually absented himself from the great autumn handicaps, it was

evident that things had come to a truly serious pass with him. Never before had man or woman been known to keep Freddy Croft away from Newmarket when the Cesarewitch and the Cambridgeshire were being run.

"Melancholy spectacle, I hear," remarked Lord Lynchester, meeting the present chronicler in St. James's Street, and deigning to recognize him. "Girl plays the fiddle, and poor old Freddy hops about after her like a tame bear, they say. One more good man gone wrong, eh?"

Making due allowance for a graceful freedom of metaphor, the picture was only too true a one. Whatsoever may have been the ties by means of which the fair violinist held Freddy in thrall—and whether they were fiddle-strings or apron-strings or heart-strings signifies little—they were strong enough to deprive him not only of liberty, but of the wish for it, and to keep him at Southlands, a willing captive.

Claud found him there upon his return, and took in the situation at a glance. So much struck, indeed, was he with the remarkable discovery which he had made that he took an early opportunity of communicating it to Miss Potts, by whom it was anything but well received.

"My dear Mr. Claud," exclaimed that justly irritated duenna, "do you think I have lost the use of my eyes, or do you take me for a deaf and dumb idiot? You must pardon my saying that, if you had been in full possession of your own senses during the summer, you would have found out before this what has been patent to everybody else for months past."

Claud stroked his chin reflectively, and said, "Dear me!"

"It has been a terrible trouble and anxiety to me. Dear Geneviève is so reserved, and I cannot ask for her confidence; and I feel that a great weight of responsibility rests upon my shoulders, and I have no one to speak to or to advise me," continued poor Miss Potts, almost tearfully. "I hardly know what to think or what to wish."

"Then I'll tell you, Miss Potts; wish that it may end in a match. Do you know, I am very much pleased at this. It never occurred to me that Freddy and Gen would be likely to suit one another; but if they do, I think we may fairly congratulate them both. It seems to me that it would be a capital thing in every way."

"I don't know; I am not sure," said Miss Potts doubtfully. "Sir Frederick is of a mer-

curial temperament, I fear. And then, if matters should turn out as we anticipate, what would the Princess say? I feel certain that she would never forgive me."

"Ah, yes; you will get a blowing up from that quarter, I dare say," observed Claud. "Varinka, I suspect, would have liked to marry Gen to a Frenchman or a Russian, and to keep her under her own eye in Paris; but between you and me, I have a notion that the governor does not mean to consent to any arrangement of that kind."

"What *does* he mean?—what *does* he intend?—that is what I want to know," cried Miss Potts. "But of course you cannot tell me. No one can tell what his projects may be; and often I am afraid that he would never consent to making anybody happy. Do you ever say your prayers, Mr. Claud?"

"Do I what?—do I—oh—er—yes, sometimes, of course," answered Claud, looking a little abashed.

"Then, the next time that you do so, you might pray Heaven to soften that—that—to soften your father's heart. I may be doing him an injustice—if so, I humbly ask pardon, and hope I may be forgiven—but I can never look at him without being reminded of Pharaoh, king of Egypt."

"Why? Because he is plagued? I know it is a mere waste of breath to take up the governor's defence before you, or Gen, or Varinka. The three of you have agreed to make a scapegoat of him, and I suppose you must be left to find out your mistake, and repent at your leisure. They say a woman cannot live without having somebody to love; but upon my word, I believe somebody to hate is quite as essential a condition of feminine happiness. One comfort is that the governor doesn't care."

"Neither did Pharaoh care. He could speak smooth things, when it suited his purpose; but he hardened his heart, and he would not let the people go," said Miss Potts, gathering up her shawl majestically about her shoulders, and preparing to quit the field.

"Varinka can't complain that she has not been allowed to go, anyhow," retorted Claud. But Miss Potts had already disappeared.

Probably self-accusation had a good deal to do with Claud's championship of Mr. Gervis. Not to him, at all events, had that much-abused man shown himself a hard task-master. Fate, it was true, had unhappily decreed that the father and son should be antagonists upon one important point; but the former had declared

war openly, honourably, and in no ungenerous fashion, whereas the latter could not but feel that he was about to snatch the victory by underhand means.

When, however, he confided his scruples to Nina, as he found an opportunity of doing before very long, she was able in some measure to allay them.

"I really don't see that you have been anything but perfectly honest with Mr. Gervis," she declared. "You gave him fair warning that you intended to marry, and it is not from him that we are running away. It seems to me that if anybody has a right to complain of being taken in, it is my father, not yours. But oh, what *does* it matter? They will both make a great fuss at first, I dare say; but things will settle down quickly, and in a year's time they will almost have forgotten that they ever objected to our marriage."

Claud had not much confidence in the fulfilment of this prediction so far as one of the malcontents was concerned; but time was too precious to be wasted in debating the inevitable, and many important matters had to be talked over and settled during the stolen meeting which prudence compelled the lovers to cut as short as might be. It was agreed that Claud

should return to France the next day, and that, immediately upon the expiration of the three weeks, Nina, accompanied by a trustworthy maid, should join him. There is a small steamer which plies regularly twice a week between Beachborough and Port Ste. Marie, usually arriving at the latter place early in the morning, and it was by means of this rather uncomfortable craft that Miss Flemyng proposed to effect her flight.

"No; you are on no account to dream of coming back for me," she said, in answer to Claud's demurrer. "I know how to look after myself, and I shall enjoy the excitement of it beyond everything. And you must not write: let us have no unnecessary risks. The only horrid part of it is that I shall literally have no clothes, except what I can wear, or stuff into a hand-bag; but I shall be able to get an outfit as soon as we reach Paris. Go now. If we were to be caught together, or our plan were discovered and put a stop to, I should simply lie down and die of shame and disgust."

Claud has since declared that for no imaginable consideration could he be induced to live over again the three weeks of his compulsory exile at Port Ste. Marie. For the first fortnight it blew and rained incessantly; he was

absolutely without means of killing time—for he had judged it prudent to send the yacht round to Cherbourg to await further orders—M. l'Hérisson was not an entertaining companion; and he dared not frequent the society of Mr. Higgins, who had an innocent way of putting the most embarrassing questions, and who once threw him into an agony of terror by talking of treating himself to a two days' holiday, if the weather should improve, and running across to Beachborough for a change. When Claud heard this alarming proposition, he said to himself that to Beachborough Mr. Higgins should not go, even though it should be necessary to keep him at Port Ste. Marie by pushing him into the harbour at the moment of embarkation; but happily an unexpected pressure of work prevented the pastor from recurring to the subject, or seeing much of the expectant bridegroom, who passed his days chiefly in roaming about the muddy streets, in asking at the *poste restante* for letters and receiving none, and in tormenting himself with visions of calamities which might be occurring, or about to occur, on the other side of the water. What if Nina were to fall ill?—or if her father were to insist upon sending her away upon a lengthened visit to some relative?—or

if some accident were to render it impossible for her to catch the steamer? Besides these natural fears, he may have had sundry other half-acknowledged misgivings; for solitude, rain, and suspense are enough to try the stoutest heart; and, after all, it is one thing to thrust your head into a noose in a moment of excitement and another to spend twenty-one days in deliberately making preparations for the catastrophe. But the heavy-footed hours marched on, forming themselves into days and weeks, and in the end came a brisk northerly wind, with frost and sunshine and promise of a bright wedding morning.

One more trial, however, was in store for Claud's already over-tried nerves. Wandering among the ruins of the old castle one morning, he became aware of a small party of equestrians —two ladies and three cavaliers—mounted on those long-tailed, prancing steeds which are the delight of the Parisian "*aux eaux*." Evidently some loiterers who had outstayed the season at one of the watering-places which lie within easy distance of Port Ste. Marie. Seeing them dismount, and divining their intention of picnicking under the shadow of the keep, Claud turned away, and was leisurely descending the slope, when one of the ladies caught sight of

him, and following him with quick steps, cut him lightly over the shoulder with her riding-whip. He wheeled round, and found himself face to face with his step-mother.

"Varinka!"

"At your service, monsieur. I saw the yacht at Cherbourg yesterday; I went on board, and learnt that you were here; and as long rides are the only amusement left to me in the detestable place where I am staying, I thought it would give an object to our excursion to-day if I were to seek you out in your retreat. Indiscreet, if you like, *mais enfin!*—"

"Not in the least indiscreet," answered Claud politely. "You are still at Trouville then?"

"Till Thursday. Upon that day, Heaven be praised, my lease of my chalet expires, and I shall make a move upon Paris. So you are delighted to see me, are you? You have not the appearance of being overjoyed. Never mind; I will tell no tales. Oh, I know my world; I know that when young men bury themselves in a fishing-village, it is because they are not alone there," says the little Princess, with a smile full of meaning.

It was perhaps just as well that her experience of the ways of young men should have misled

her in the present instance, and Claud did not defend himself against her insinuations. "I know my world too," returned he, laughing; "and I know that you did not come here for the pleasure of meeting me. In what way can I delight myself by serving you?"

"In the simplest way possible. I want to hear what is going on over there in England —what *he* means to do with my poor Geneviève. I have been most uneasy—most unhappy about her; and she writes the shortest letters, and tells me nothing at all."

"I thought Miss Potts sent you a volume of news every week," said Claud.

"Potts is a monster of deceit and ingratitude! I have broken with Potts. She is in the conspiracy against me, like the rest of you. It is very hard to be able to trust nobody—not even those whom one loves most!" cried Varinka, with real tears in her eyes.

"What do you mean?" asked Claud.

"As if you did not know! I have understood it all from the first. His object is to deprive me of the only creature who cares for me; to marry Geneviève in England, where he knows that I shall never be able to see her, and to leave me utterly alone in the world. But I do not yet hold myself beaten; and you may tell

him so from me. I had his promise that he would restore Geneviève to me free, and as soon as I am established at home again, I mean to claim it."

"If he promised you that, he will do it," said Claud, prudently resolving to arouse no premature storms by a reference to Freddy Croft.

Varinka tapped her white teeth with the handle of her whip meditatively. "He is quite clever enough to find a way of breaking his word and keeping it at the same time," she remarked. "But now tell me the truth; what is this young Croft? Has he serious intentions? is he dangerous? does Geneviève encourage him?"

Claud, however, was very circumspect, and would tell nothing. Certainly Freddy was often at Southlands; in the country one naturally sees a good deal of one's neighbours. He (Claud) really could not say whether Geneviève liked him better than other young men. Should have imagined that, if she had had any confidences to make, she would have reposed them in the Princess. Knew nothing of Mr. Gervis's designs, and did not, for his part, believe that his father had any. And so forth, and so forth —coming out of his cross-examination, upon the whole, not discreditably. After a time

Varinka, finding that there was no information to be got out of him, let him go. She would have introduced him to her friends and made him welcome to a share of the good things which were being carried up from the hotel; but he begged to be excused, not feeling himself in the humour for social intercourse, and took his leave.

"Why do you not come and see me in Paris?" the Princess called after him. "Have you not had enough of that horrible English solitude?"

"I mean to go to Paris. I shall see you there very soon," Claud answered. And he wondered, as he strolled down towards the town, what kind of reception she would accord to Mrs. Claud Gervis. Probably a gracious one, he thought, for Varinka always adored new friends for a time; moreover, a marriage which was distasteful to her husband must, from that fact alone, be agreeable to her. He had no wish, however, that she should get any inkling of what was imminent; and it was with much relief that, looking down from his bedroom window an hour later, he saw her and her party curvetting and clattering out of the courtyard of the hotel.

The sun of his wedding morning was hardly

above the horizon before Claud was out upon the cliff, watching anxiously for the approach of the little Beachborough steamer. He had a long time to wait, fidgeting to and fro, cold, nervous, and filled with restless forebodings; for he had risen much too early, and his vigil would certainly have been prolonged by an hour or two, if the weather had been in its normal condition at that season of the year. But, as luck would have it, the day proved one of those perfectly still ones which sometimes intervene between the late autumn gales. A thin layer of clouds was spread low above a grey and glassy sea; mists hung motionless over the surface of the water; and about eight o'clock, long before the steamer was in sight, Claud's ear caught the far-away beating of her paddles.

Nina had enjoined him on no account to meet her on the quay; for the captain and crew of the vessel, being Beachborough men, would have recognized him, and naturally drawn their own conclusions. He had, therefore, to return to the hotel, and to pass through a further period of suspense, which seemed to him interminable; but just as he had made up his mind that some awful calamity must have occurred, the clanging bell which gave notice

of the arrival of travellers at the Hôtel de Paris roused the echoes, and Miss Flemyng, calm, smiling, and not veiled, walked in through the *porte-cochère*, attended by her maid and followed by a porter wheeling two trunks of goodly dimensions upon a barrow. She was so cool, and bore the inquisitive glances of the landlord and his underlings with such complete indifference that Claud was ashamed of his own perturbation.

"I have managed to bring a few things with me, after all, you see," she said, pointing to the luggage. "When the time came nearer, I felt that it would be so horribly inconvenient to have nothing to wear that I resolved to bear away some of my belongings or to perish in the attempt. I told papa I was going to stay with a friend—literal truth, you know, which is what you have such a weakness for—drove to the station, boxes and all, dismissed the carriage, walked down to the boat, and then sent two sailors back to claim my property. We had a delightful passage; only I am almost dead of starvation. Will there be time for me to have some breakfast? Yes? Well then, please order them to get something ready while I am dressing, and we will tell each other all our news when I come down. I am too tired and hungry and dirty to talk now."

Her self-possession had its effect upon Claud, who awoke to the advisability of keeping up appearances in the presence of so many curious spectators; and he contrived presently to eat a very good breakfast opposite to her, while informing her in an undertone of the arrangements which he had made and instructing her as to her part in the impending formalities.

Never, probably, was a runaway marriage celebrated in a more matter-of-course manner. Breakfast over, the bride and bridegroom walked together to the consulate; and there, in the presence of M. l'Hérisson, Claud Gervis, bachelor, and Georgina Flemyng, spinster, having declared that they knew of no impediment why they should not be joined together in matrimony, and having called upon the two attendant clerks to witness that they took one another respectively as husband and wife, were united by a tie as binding as the law could make it. All passed off smoothly; but when the little procession entered the church, and Mr. Higgins perceived that the lady was accompanied by neither father, mother, nor guardian, that worthy divine's countenance fell, and he plainly began to suspect that all was not quite as it should be. As, however, he had got his surplice on, and as

the parties were already *de jure* man and wife, it was rather too late in the day to hesitate about pronouncing the Church's blessing upon their union, and he confined himself to pointing out to Claud, in an agitated aside, that there was apparently no one present to give the bride away. M. l'Hérisson gallantly offered to repair this omission; and Mrs. Higgins, in the absence of a more duly qualified person, was good enough to drop a few motherly tears upon her open prayer-book.

Late that same afternoon, when the newly-married pair were driving away from the Paris terminus, the following succinct telegram reached the person to whom it was addressed.

"*N. Flemyng, Port Ste. Marie, to J. Flemyng, Esq., The Moated House, Beachborough, England.*—Married to Claud Gervis this morning. Sorry to have caused inconvenience. Better put announcement in papers, save appearances. Will write to-morrow."

CHAPTER X.

A PLEASANT PARTY.

THE news of the escapade recorded in the last chapter created, as may be supposed, no small stir in Beachborough and its neighbourhood, and was not slow to spread itself over a much wider area. Asiatics, it is said, have some mysterious manner of transmitting intelligence from city to city with greater rapidity than any known means of communication can carry it. I have no personal experience of Indian bazaars; but I am continually coming across, in my own country, phenomena in the way of conveying information which I am sure would be no discredit to Delhi, Baroda, or Peshawur; and it is a fact, the explanation of which I leave to the curious, that whereas Mr. Flemyng can hardly have received the despatch telling him of his daughter's flight before six o'clock p.m., I was accosted at eleven o'clock

that same night, in the smoking-room of my club, by a Lynshire acquaintance, who asked me whether I had heard that young Gervis had bolted with that pretty girl who used to be always about with the Crofts.

Confirmatory details reached me later. From my grandmother (to whom I applied) I obtained, it is true, nothing but the briefest and driest statement of the facts, for Mrs. Knowles is not fond of committing her sentiments to paper; but others were less guarded in their utterances, and as there are many Beachborough people who are kind enough to look me up whenever they spend a day or two in London, I was furnished, before the week was out, with a full and particular account of how the affair had happened, and also, as I need hardly say, with several versions of how it had not. My informants differed considerably, both as to the circumstances of the case and as to their verdict upon them, some taking the part of the old people, some that of the young, some asserting that Claud had a considerable fortune in his own right, which his father was compelled to surrender to him on his marriage, others that the improvident couple had not a penny between them, and would soon be reduced to beggary, while a

few—these were ladies, I am afraid—had ascertained for a fact that there had been no marriage, at Port Ste. Marie or elsewhere, until Mr. Flemyng had threatened to cross the water himself, and resort to measures of compulsion. Nearly all, however, were agreed that it was a discreditable, not to say disgraceful business from beginning to end.

But perhaps the general view was most aptly and concisely expressed by Colonel Finch, whom I met one evening descending the steps of the military club to which he belongs, and who caught me by the arm while he jerked out a few sentences in his peculiar, high-pitched voice.

"So our young friend at Southlands has been making an ass of himself, I hear—making an ass of himself—what? Girl's fault, of course—always is in these cases—yes. Sharp girl too—eye to the main chance—what? But must have taken some romantic notion into her head—some romantic notion. Stupid affair, very: what the young fellows call bad form. When you and I were boys"—pretty cool, this, considering that Colonel Finch used to tip me in my school-days—"when you and I were boys, Knowles, that sort of thing used to be done. Gretna Green, and a blacksmith

fellow who tied the knot for you, and the irate parents following you in a post-chaise, and all that—yes. We used to be in a deuce of a fright of our fathers, and small blame to us! But nobody is in a fright of his father nowadays, and nobody ever thinks of running away to be married. Only get laughed at if you do. Great mistake to get laughed at—yes."

I didn't laugh much myself, though I was certainly inclined to agree with Colonel Finch in thinking that poor Claud had acted the part of an ass in this matter. A lonely bachelor of my age, without home ties or much of a life of his own to look forward to, is apt to interest himself in the fortunes of younger men, and to experience vicariously their loves and ambitions, their failures and successes. I have identified myself in this way with a good many promising youths, first and last, and I am bound to say that most of them have disappointed me abominably. Here, for instance, was one of whom considerable things might reasonably have been expected—a fellow with a handsome face, winning manners and good expectations, not to mention a share of brains considerably above the average,—saddling himself, at the outset of his career, with a flirting wife, quarrelling with his father, and

surrendering the liberty which, in my humble judgment, all sensible folks ought to preserve up to the age of thirty at least. When people in whom I feel an interest behave like that, I can't help resenting their conduct as something in the nature of a personal slight; and what added to my annoyance in the present instance was that my annual Christmas visit to Beachborough was at hand, and that I had been looking forward to a renewal of my friendship with young Gervis, for whose future guidance, indeed, I had been at the pains of sketching out sundry schemes which must now be rendered abortive.

In my grandmother's drawing-room, which I entered, a few days later, simultaneously with the afternoon tea which I drink and she despises, I dwelt with some bitterness upon the frustration of these well-meant designs. I had hoped, I said, to induce Claud to read for the bar; to get him up to London, where he would have been able to combine instruction in the laws and constitution of his country with a practical insight into the workings of modern English society. I had looked forward to seeing him in parliament, pushing his way towards the front in political life, which is the first and best of all occupations, if only a man

have the requisite means to enable him to pursue it. But now he had done for himself. With a wife and a diminished income, and a host of potential children, and an offended and capricious father (who, by the way, might live for another twenty years) in the background, what hope was there that he would ever lift his head above the struggling crowd of indigent mediocrities? It was most disheartening to be baulked in this way time after time—enough to disgust a man with his fellow-creatures. I concluded by observing, with more truth than originality, that women had been at the root of all mischief and trouble from the days of Eve downwards.

But my grandmother was, for reasons best known to herself, in a bad temper, and denied me the solace of her sympathy.

"There are more fools walking about in breeches than in petticoats, according to my notion," said she, in answer to my last remark; "and for a downright mischievous fool, commend me to one who is for ever meddling with his neighbour's business. When a man has made a failure of his own life," she added, rather cruelly, "I can't for the life of me see why he should fancy that he has a gift for assisting Providence to shape the lives of other

people. I don't mean to discuss the Gervises with you. I've heard them and their affairs and their ways of going on chattered over during the last few months till I am sick and tired of the subject. There are a dozen people coming to dinner presently. You can gossip with them to your heart's content, and nothing will give them greater pleasure than to furnish you with all the particulars of this precious elopement. In the meantime you had better go and get dressed, or you will make the first arrivals your enemies for life by not being in the room to receive them."

Have I ever, I wonder, got through one of my grandmother's ceremonious dinner-parties without contriving to offend somebody? I dread those solemn banquets: the recollection of past blunders leads me to approach them with so much nervousness that some fresh fiasco on my part is almost a foregone conclusion. If only the dear old lady would take the marshalling of her guests into her own hands, or if at least she would allow me to carry a written list of them, properly divided into couples, all might be well; but she can never be brought to consent to either of these courses, and the consequence is that I am perpetually violating the order of precedence

in a way which nothing but respect for Mrs. Knowles could induce the slighted persons to overlook. I know that I am much to blame in this matter. I admit that, if the Duchess of Hightown, who is the daughter of a duke, is entitled to display wrath at being asked to walk behind the Duchess of Mightytown, whose father was only a marquis, Mrs. Whipper, as being the daughter of a baron's younger son's eldest son, has an equal right to complain of being sent in to dinner after Mrs. Snapper, who can but claim a baronet for her grandfather; but I think it might be taken as an extenuating circumstance that we have a red book to guide us in the former case and not in the latter; and as my own lot in life brings me into contact rather with baronets' granddaughters than with duchesses, I hope I may be permitted to take this opportunity of assuring my friends that when I err, my offence should not be attributed to ignorance or want of respect for their several dignities, but simply to the inroads of a treacherous memory. I am sorry to say that, upon the occasion of the feast which the progress of my narrative now leads me to refer to, I fell into a more than usually stupid blunder.

"Good Gawd, sir! you're all wrong," whis-

pered Hicks to me in agitated accents, as I passed him on my way towards the dining-room, with Mrs. Pender on my arm.

Of course I was all wrong! I recollected immediately Mrs. Bagshawe's grandfather in the peerage of Ireland—or rather, I recollected that he belonged to her; for in truth the deceased nobleman had been very present in my mind all the time that I had been dressing for dinner, only I had fathered him upon the wrong lady,—and now here was Mrs. Bagshawe taking her place upon my left hand with an expression of sorrow rather than of anger upon her face, while the Admiral, less accustomed to self-repression, was glowering at me furiously from the other end of the table.

We don't ignore these little mistakes in Beachborough. We expect a full and speedy apology for them, and I don't know what would not happen if it were withheld. I made haste to excuse myself as best I could to my neighbour. "So stupid of me! I can't think how I can have made such a mistake! All I can do is to throw myself upon your kindness," etc., etc.

"Oh, it is of no consequence," she answers sweetly. "For my own part, I am perfectly indifferent as to who may take me into dinner,

so long as it is not a disagreeable person. Still, there *is* a right way and a wrong way of doing everything—isn't there, Mr. Knowles?"

Quite so. I hang my abashed head. Presently, however, I become aware that Mrs. Bagshawe does not intend to be hard upon me this evening. From the pensive smile with which she contemplates me I gather that only a sense of what is due to herself keeps her from at once condoning my offence and allowing bygones to be bygones. Once or twice she opens her lips, gives a sort of gasp and a swallow, and closing them again, as if with an effort, looks down at her plate. From of old I know the interpretation of these signs. Mrs. Bagshawe has something of interest to communicate to me, and she is on tenter-hooks lest that pushing woman Mrs. Pender should forestall her. I feel that the least I can do is to give her a lead over the first fence, so to speak.

"Any Beachborough news, Mrs. Bagshawe?" I inquire pleasantly.

"*Well*—" she begins, her expressive countenance becoming forthwith irradiated with smiles. "But perhaps I ought not to talk about it. And very likely it might be no news to you, who are such a great friend of the family."

"I assure you I have heard next to nothing,"

I reply, wishing to please her. "I know, of course, that there has been a clandestine marriage; but my information does not extend much further."

"Oh, that is a very old story," says Mrs. Bagshawe quite contemptuously; "everybody knows all about *that*. But really they are such very strange people—there always seems to be something. Have you not heard anything lately about Miss Gervis?"

I shake my head.

"What, nothing about her and Sir Frederick Croft? Oh, Mr. Knowles, I am sure you must have heard; only you do not choose to commit yourself. You are so careful."

I protest against this unfounded accusation. A certain amount of reserve before strangers may, I point out, be advisable; but what need can there be for weighing every word when one is in the company of old friends, whose discretion is notorious? Thus encouraged, Mrs. Bagshawe confesses that she hates your over-cautious people, and without further beating about the bush, plunges into the midst of her subject:—

"I heard it this afternoon from Miss Pennefather, who had just seen Lady Croft, and who says there cannot be the slightest doubt about

the truth of it. Sir Frederick proposed three days ago, and Mr. Gervis simply wouldn't hear of the match. No reason given—no conditions suggested—nothing! Simply a direct refusal. And that, although the girl herself had accepted him 'with avidity.' The expression is Miss Pennefather's, not mine, and I must say that I don't think it a very proper one. She says Lady Croft is in a dreadful state about it. Everybody knows his own business best, I suppose; but really, after all that has taken place—don't you think it most extraordinary conduct, Mr. Knowles?"

"Oh, I never heard of such a thing."

"Just what I said myself!" cries Mrs. Bagshawe, rapping the table emphatically with her knife; "my very words! 'Miss Pennefather,' I said, 'I never heard of such a thing!' You see, if the young man had not been led on by every possible means, if he had not been encouraged to almost live in the house, and to go on in such a way that the whole county has been talking about him and her, it would be quite another case. I should be the last person to deny that Sir Frederick is in many respects undesirable as a son-in-law; he is not at all the sort of husband whom I should choose for one of *my* girls, for instance. But

Mr. Gervis must have known perfectly well what he was about all through the summer; he has plenty of wits, I'll say that for him; and he cannot have had any doubt as to what the end of it would be. Depend upon it, there is more in all this than meets the eye. What is the man's motive?—that's what puzzles me—what is his motive?"

"*Pride*," says Mrs. Pender, in a deep, lugubrious voice. Mrs. Pender is a person of few words; but what she does say is usually much to the point. "The pride that exalteth itself shall be abased," she continues. "I have observed this man since he came among us. He arrived here with a doubtful reputation—whether justly earned or not I do not say; I judge no man—but he was received with reserve, perhaps with some little coldness, and his object ever since has been to avenge himself upon us. Having no children myself, it does not become me to boast that I should refuse a son-in-law of Sir Frederick Croft's position; but it cannot be denied that, speaking from a worldly point of view, Sir Frederick is the most desirable match in Lynshire, and doubtless Mr. Gervis imagines that in rejecting him he has shown himself superior to us all. But let him take heed. Already one chasten-

ing blow has fallen upon him: it may yet be needful for his soul's welfare that Providence should humble him even to the dust."

Mrs. Pender is one of the most prominent and earnest members of the Vicar of Trinity's flock. Upright, charitable (in the almsgiving sense of the word), a friend to missionaries, and a deadly foe to ritualism, Romanism, scepticism, dancing, and card-playing—all of which she brackets together in one comprehensive anathema—she is held in high esteem by a certain section of the community, but is no favourite in our little society, which likes its whist-parties and other innocent pastimes. "Gad, sir!" said the Admiral to me, upon one occasion, "if that woman is as cock-sure of getting to Heaven as she professes to be, I don't think poor old Pender will mind much if he finds himself booked for t'other place." She has but to open her lips to insure a prompt contradiction from Mrs. Bagshawe.

"Pride indeed!" cries that lady; "oh, my dear Mrs. Pender, that is a little too absurd! No doubt we all have our besetting sins, and I could name one or two people who, for some reason or other, fancy themselves better than the rest of the world; but you will never convince me that Mr. Gervis is so devoid of

common sense as to suppose that anybody, except himself and the Crofts, would care whether he sent Sir Frederick about his business or not. No, no; he must have some less far-fetched reason than that for his actions. But I don't think you know him personally, do you? Didn't somebody tell me that he had never returned your visit? Very rude of him, I must say! But perhaps it was an oversight."

"Whoever told you that," answers Mrs. Pender, with rather unchristian warmth, "told you a deliberate falsehood. We have exchanged visits with the Southlands people; but I was not anxious that the acquaintance should go further. I did not desire to be seen frequently in the house of a man who has no settled religious convictions. Indeed, I often doubt whether I am not wrong in continuing to accept the hospitality of this place even to the limited extent that I do."

"Ah, well; the remedy is in your own hands, you know," observes Mrs. Bagshawe.

In this way the controversy assumed a more directly personal complexion, and Mr. Gervis's domestic affairs were temporarily lost sight of. But as soon as the ladies had left us, and I had changed my chair, according to custom, for that just vacated by my grandmother, the topic was

reverted to with a promptitude which convinced me that Beachborough was as much interested as ever in the proceedings of its incomprehensible neighbour. An enforced silence had, I suspect, been hitherto observed, owing to the presence of Mrs. Knowles, whose disapprobation of idle talk is well known, and who had maintained a particularly stern and awful demeanour throughout the evening; but this restraint upon conversation being now removed, there was nothing to prevent Admiral Bagshawe from speaking out his mind with his usual openness.

"The most outrageous piece of swagger and vulgar ostentation that could be imagined"—that was the Admiral's opinion of it. "Who the dickens cares whether Gervis is such a dashed fool as to think his daughter too good for anybody in Lynshire or not? Times are changed, I suppose. I have always understood that offers of marriage were considered as confidential communications; but here we have this fellow rushing down to the town post-haste, and telling the whole story to the first old woman he meets. Dashed ungentlemanly conduct, I call it—and impertinent too."

A modest interpolation to the effect that Lady Croft, not Mr. Gervis, appeared to have been Miss Pennefather's informant did not

avail to lessen the severity of the Admiral's strictures.

"I don't care a brass farthing who spread the news; what I say is, the news ought not to have been spread at all; and wouldn't have been, unless Gervis had intended that it should. Don't tell *me!*"

Mr. Pender quotes the old saying about washing dirty linen at home in an impressive voice, as though that somewhat unsavoury metaphor had just emerged from his own active brain, and goes on to observe that when people give themselves airs, one naturally inquires what ground they have for doing so. Who, he asks, are these Gervises, after all? What does anybody know about them, except that they have plenty of money? Here some one halfway down the table—a mere raw youth of two or three and forty, who ought to know better than to interrupt his seniors—has the temerity to mumble something about "a good old family."

"I believe, sir," says Mr. Pender loftily, "that that is a distinction to which most of us here can lay claim. My own family, I may say, is both a good and an old one."

At this the Admiral gives a tremendous barking cough which makes the glasses ring (for indeed it is a matter of notoriety that Pender

père made his money in trade, which we in Beachborough still hold to be quite irreconcilable with gentility), and General Blair, catching an echo of this familiar war-cry, lifts his hand to his ear, and asks, "Eh? what's that?—what's he say?"

The Admiral squares himself to face his neighbour, and roars out—"Mr. Pender—says he belongs—to a good—old—family."

"Oh, ah! yes—yes—capital, capital!" answers the other veteran, chuckling.

I fear our poor old friend General Blair is breaking up fast. After this brief contribution to the harmony of the evening, he sinks down in his chair, and relapses into a smiling silence. The conversation is taken up by fresh speakers, and as it proceeds, I perceive that Mr. Gervis has not known how to make friends for himself in the land of his birth. One remarks that, for such a rich man as he is said to be, he has not done much in the way of hospitality; another complains of his "nasty, sneering way of speaking to you;" a third has noticed that he can never look you in the face; it is universally agreed that he holds his head a deuced sight too high, by George, and that the misfortune that has fallen upon him in the matter of his son's marriage has been richly deserved.

Whence all this acrimony? To any one unacquainted with Beachborough it may appear a little inexplicable. I don't know whether other small towns resemble ours; but with us there has ever existed a strong feeling of solidarity—if I may be allowed to borrow a foreign word for which I can find no right equivalent. We cannot endure that a man should live among us and not be of us. Snubbing we can bear; quarrelling we can bear, and even enjoy; but what wounds us in our most sensitive part is to be ignored; and it was of this offence that Mr. Gervis had been guilty. With the exception of that one appearance of his at the yeomanry ball, he had taken no part in local festivities; he had declined the invitations of the residents, and had sent them none in return; he had left cards at their respective doors, without asking to be admitted; he had behaved, in short, as if there were no flourishing sea-port and celebrated watering-place at his gates. Therefore it was that Mrs. Pender relied confidently upon Providence to humble him to the dust; therefore it was that her lord demanded to know who he was; therefore Admiral Bagshawe accused him of vulgar ostentation, and the chorus rejoiced over his calamities. The Admiral tersely summed up

the case against him as we rose from the table.

"All dashed fine," says he; "but that sort of thing won't do with me. I mean to say, I don't care to put up with it. All my life long I've adopted one and the same plan with fellows who try to come the great man over me and ride the dashed high horse. I let 'em alone, sir—I let 'em alone."

It occurred to me that this form of chastisement would probably be accepted by Mr. Gervis with a good deal of equanimity; but I need hardly say that I kept my thoughts to myself, and we went up to the drawing-room to discover my grandmother seated in solitary state by the fireside, and the other ladies collected in a compact phalanx, their old noses almost touching in the warmth of earnest conversation. From the few words that caught my ear as we made our entry, I gathered that the subject of Miss Pennefather's startling news had not yet been exhausted. I hope the old women enjoyed themselves during the hour that succeeded: the old men did not, I know. We cordially detest that postprandial hour in the drawing-room; but etiquette commands us to submit to it. No one dares to move until the lady highest in

rank has risen from her chair; and then the rest of the company promptly jump up, and troop out of the room in her wake.

When I went upstairs again, after seeing the last of the guests into their fly, I found that Mrs. Knowles had already got out the old family bible, and was waiting, spectacles on nose, for evening prayers, which ceremony is never dispensed with, even on dinner-party nights, under her roof. I knew, therefore, that any reference, that night, to Freddy Croft's alleged disappointment would be considered inopportune; and I had to go to bed without ascertaining whether my grandmother knew anything as to its truth. Nor did she prove to be in a more communicative mood the next morning. I spent that day partly at the club, partly in paying certain duty-calls, debating all the time with myself whether I would go to Southlands or not. I hesitated until the early darkness fell and it was too late to think of it any longer, and then returned to South Crescent; but at five o'clock I was destined to receive confirmation of Mrs. Bagshawe's story from the best of all sources. For at that hour, who should walk in, looking a trifle older and feebler, I thought, than when I had seen him last, but Mr. Gervis himself?

He was so obliging as to declare that he was particularly glad to see me in Beachborough again. Apart, he said, from the pleasure which it naturally gave him to renew our acquaintance, he must plead guilty to a selfish reason for welcoming me back—the hope, namely, that I would be kind enough to give him some assistance in the carrying out of a troublesome duty which had devolved upon him. I at once surmised that I was about to be asked to act in some manner as an intermediary between Southlands and Croft Manor, and hastened to assure Mr. Gervis of my readiness to be of use to him in any way that lay within the range of my poor abilities. Perhaps I may have an idea that I am peculiarly fitted by nature for the office of a peacemaker, and that my friends may credit me with some power of distinguishing myself in that modest capacity. It was with a good deal of surprise, therefore, that I learnt the nature of the services required of me.

"I am going," said Mr. Gervis, after politely thanking me in anticipation, "to entertain the natives. It will be a great trouble—an especial trouble under existing circumstances; but I feel that it ought to be done, and I am sure that Mrs. Knowles will agree with me that

duty must be placed above all other considerations. It was to consult her, in fact, with regard to invitations and so on that I came here; and now I have the good fortune to fall upon her grandson, who will be even better able to help me, and who must expect to suffer the penalty of bearing a character for good-nature. If Claud had been here I should have left the arrangement of all details to him; but Claud, as you know, has left me. I trust, Mr. Knowles, that you won't refuse to come to the aid of an old man, who finds himself suddenly deprived of his right hand through no fault of his own."

Who could resist so pathetic an appeal? It is true that it was not uttered in very pathetic accents; but weakness in any shape was hardly to be expected of Mr. Gervis, and knowing, as I did, what Claud and he had been to one another, my pity for the forlorn father needed no artificial stimulus. At the risk of being thought impertinent, I could not help telling him how sorry I had been to hear of Claud's ill-advised marriage.

He shrugged his shoulders expressively. "I did what I could to prevent it," said he; "but I failed. Matrimony, it would appear, presents especial dangers to our family. I am sorry for

Claud ; but he has chosen for himself, with his eyes open, and he must take the consequences. I wish he could have made it convenient to put off his nuptials until after this festival, or at least that he had thought of leaving me some sort of instructions to work upon. Ought I to encourage local enterprise, do you think ?—or would you advise me to write up to London ? I have heard that there are contractors there who will take the whole business off your hands, and provide you with everything—band, lights, supper, and all the rest of it—at a fixed charge."

"You don't mean to say," ejaculated my grandmother, peering at him over her spectacles, "that you are thinking of giving a ball !"

"Subject to your approval, my dear Mrs. Knowles. I have not sent out my invitations yet ; but I can see no other way of satisfying the community at large. To receive all these good creatures at dinner would probably bring about my demise long before the list was exhausted ; and besides, there would not be time, for in a week or ten days from now I intend to break up my establishment here."

"I suspected how it would be," said my grandmother, with a grim chuckle. "I thought Beachborough would not do for very long. So you are off on your travels again ?"

"I am off somewhere—where I can hardly say as yet. I own I have not the fortitude to face a life of complete solitude at Southlands; and I am sending my daughter away to Paris on this day week. I proposed to have the ball on the night before her departure. With that final flare-up we shall disappear as abruptly as we came; having, I hope, done something towards enlivening you all during our stay."

"Hum!—yes; we can't complain of you on that score. And a pretty mess you have made of things, first and last! I should like to know what you mean by it all."

Mr. Gervis laid his head on one side, and surveyed the old lady with his bland interrogative smile.

"Now it is no use your putting on that face," said my grandmother, nodding at him in a resolute manner, "because you can't intimidate me, and I intend to have it out with you before you leave."

"With all my heart, dear Mrs. Knowles. Shall we have it out now?"

My grandmother looked at me a little dubiously. I am sorry to say that she has a poor opinion of my discretion. I got up at once; but Mr. Gervis arrested me with a deprecatory gesture.

"My dear sir, pray do not stir. We are not going to talk secrets; and I have some hope that your presence may induce your grandmother to spare me as far as her conscience will allow her. Perhaps I may be permitted to urge, as an additional plea in favour of clemency, that I have had to suffer many things at the hands of various ladies during the last few days."

"Serve you right!" cried Mrs. Knowles, pitilessly.

"Very likely; but if you had seen Lady Croft in—shall we say the tantrums?—for three hours together at a stretch, you might possibly admit that I have done a fair amount of penance. Miss Potts, too, when brought to bay, has a marvellous flow of language at command. You were asking what I meant by it all, which is, I presume, tantamount to asking what I mean by declining to sanction an engagement between my daughter and young Croft."

Mrs. Knowles nodded as before.

"Well, I have not the slightest objection to telling you. You will probably disbelieve me; but that is not my fault. If you, and other people choose to set up a theory that the race of monsters is not extinct, I can't help it. I am not a chimera; I don't rampage about the world, gobbling up fair youths and

tender maidens, and exulting over their dying agonies; I am nothing more extraordinary than a perplexed nineteenth century father, with notions of duty—expediency—whatever you like to call it. You consider me devoid of all natural affection; and there you are certainly right. Nevertheless, I have an idea that nature intended the experience of parents to serve as a protection to their children; and my experience teaches me that people who rush off helter-skelter to get married for no other reason than that they happen to have fallen in love with one another usually have reason to repent of their bargain in a surprisingly short time. That has been my chief reason for acting in the way that has caused so much disturbance. Another, and a less important one, is that, when the Princess left England, I gave her a sort of half-promise that on Geneviève's return to her protection she should be unhampered by any matrimonial engagement. There is yet a third, which I mention with all diffidence; namely, that I do not remember to have ever come across a couple more ill-suited by tastes and habits to spend their lives together than these two. Taking all this into consideration, I refused to entertain Croft's proposal. You may imagine

the distressing scenes that ensued, and the hard words with which I was pelted from all sides. But the heat of the struggle is over now, and, with the exception of Lady Croft, who, I am sorry to say, is still very angry, we are all tolerably good friends. There is to be no engagement; but the young people (of course) are going to remain faithful to one another through thick and thin; and in two years, when Geneviève will have attained her majority, they will be free to renew their vows, if they are still so inclined. Time and absence will thus have full opportunity of doing their work. If our young friends rise superior to them, they will only have sacrificed twenty-four months of beatitude, which, terrible as it is, will be no great matter to look back upon. If, on the other hand, they change their minds, how thankful they will be to me for having, in the plenitude of my wisdom, saved them from a lifetime of repentance! And now, my dear Mrs. Knowles, you have heard all about it."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Knowles; "and do you know what the upshot of this will be?"

"Not in the least. Do you?"

"Why, yes. You will have another elopement from your house before you are much older."

"I think not. Geneviève is a minor, you must bear in mind. Moreover, the apples of the Hesperides were not more safe than she will be under the dragon-eyes of Potts."

"Well, well!" sighed my grandmother, somewhat softened; "you may be right, or you may be wrong; I don't set myself up to judge. But one thing is clear: you have broken up your home, and turned your children against you. I will go so far as to say that I am sorry for you, Vincent Gervis."

"Why? You would not be sorry if you knew how exactly things have fallen out in accordance with my wishes. I didn't want the girl to marry in haste; I didn't want to marry her out of hand to an Englishman; still less did I want the Princess to marry her to some dubious sort of foreigner. The situation is precisely what I should have chosen. Once she is established in Paris, the Princess will take very good care that she does not see much of Master Freddy; she herself, being of a somewhat contrary disposition, will refuse to look at any of her step-mother's *protégés*; and I, like a guardian angel, shall hover round, watching the progress of affairs, and perhaps keeping my eye upon some more suitable candidate, should any such turn up in the nick

of time. For, between ourselves, I have no great belief in the amiable Frederick's tenacity of purpose."

"Do you mean me to understand, then, that all this is a pre-arranged plot?" asked my grandmother, in some surprise.

"Heaven forbid! I never attempt to guide events; I only shape my conduct in accordance with them. I may claim for myself that I foresaw probabilities; nothing more. And now, since it appears that I am not going to be scolded, may I revert to the business which brought me here, and beg you to tell me how I am to get invitations printed, and my house turned topsy-turvy, and a brilliant ball successfully carried through—all within the space of six days?"

"Tom is your man," said my grandmother, pointing to me. "He is not good for much in the world; but I will say for him that when there is any occasion for rushing about, and planning, and arranging, he is in his element. He prides himself upon what he calls his 'tact,' which is another word for setting folks by the ears and then forcing them into making it up again. He will do the business for you."

Fortified by these credentials, I threw myself energetically into the task before me.

CHAPTER XI.

BEACHBOROUGH PERPLEXED.

HERE is a cutting from the *Lynshire County Chronicle*, bearing date 10th December, 187—, which I find among the various documents which have assisted me in piecing together the present narrative :—

"FASHIONABLE BALL AT BEACHBOROUGH.—On Wednesday last a gathering at once select and numerous assembled under the hospitable roof of Vincent Gervis, of Southlands, Esq., where nothing had been neglected that liberal expenditure, refined taste, and the unwearied exertions of a genial host could do towards insuring the success of what we may perhaps term, without exaggeration, the most sumptuous ball that has taken place in Beachborough or its vicinity for many years past. Among the bevy of noble and distinguished guests who graced the gay scene with their presence we

noticed: Viscount Courtney, G.C.B., and Viscountess Courtney, the Earl and Countess of Lynchester, Sir Frederick Croft, Lady and Miss Croft, Mr. and Lady Maria Pilkington, Mr. and Mrs. Knowles, of Stone Hall, Mr. J. G. Pettigrew, M.P., Rear-Admiral, Mrs., and the Misses Bagshawe, Major-General Blair, C.B., and Mrs. Blair, Colonel Heaviside and Officers 121st Light Infantry, Mr. Flemyng, Mr. T. Knowles, &c.

"Words would fail to do justice to the excellence of the arrangements and the careful attention to *minutiæ* which will cause this truly aristocratic fête to be long remembered in the neighbourhood. Suffice it to say that the magnificent supper was furnished entirely by the well-known Messrs. Provinder and Son, of High Street, Beachborough, while the decorations, which were of an unusually chaste and elegant character, had been committed to the competent hands of Messrs. Curtain, the celebrated firm of local upholsterers. The string band of the 121st Light Infantry was in attendance, and discoursed sweet music, to the entire satisfaction of the dancers, up to an advanced hour on Thursday morning. Dancing was kept up with unflagging spirit from first to last; and had not the season been mid-winter, the revel-

lers, on tearing themselves reluctantly away from the ball-room, would have found their carriages awaiting them in the broad light of day.

"Southlands, the ancestral seat of the Gervis family, which, as many of our readers are aware, received no guests during the lifetime of the late owner, is, we regret to hear, likely to be once more shut up for a lengthened period, as Mr. Gervis proposes to leave home very shortly, and we understand that no date is fixed for his return."

No one will ever know what obstacles had to be surmounted in order to render Mr. Gervis's ball a success, except those upon whom devolved the task of sending out invitations without the help of a visiting list, of drilling recalcitrant servants, spurring on lazy tradesmen, and getting the work of three weeks accomplished in six days. There were social as well as material difficulties; for upon the first blush of the thing, Beachborough was inclined to cavil at the shortness of the invitation, and was by no means clear that it could be accepted consistently with self-respect; and again, personal interviews had to be sought with Lord Courtney and other magnates, whose presence was indispensable, but who would fain have been excused drives

of fifteen and eighteen miles on a winter's night. Howbeit, disinterestedness ultimately reaped its reward in a complete triumph. The great people consented to come; the smaller ones on hearing of this, unhesitatingly followed their lead; and if my memory does not deceive me, Mrs. Pender was the only person who sent in a refusal.

Doubtless curiosity and a partial knowledge of the peculiar circumstances under which this entertainment had been so hastily decided upon added much zest to the enjoyment of the company. It was amusing to observe how the eyes of each fresh arrival, after taking stock of the multitude of wax candles, and the profusion of floral decorations in the ball-room, roved anxiously hither and thither till they rested upon the silvery locks of Mr. Flemyng, or the jovial countenance of Freddy Croft, and to note the uplifting of eyebrows, and the furtive nudging of elbows that invariably followed. Lynshire was mystified. Only a few weeks before, the county had been thrown into a ferment by the news that the only son of the present entertainer had fled from his father's roof in company with the daughter of a highly-respected neighbour; yet here were the afflicted parents conversing amicably, and contemplating the scene

with benevolent smiles. Only a few days before, it had been currently reported that a love-match between the daughter of the house and a popular young baronet had been untimely nipped in the bud ; yet yonder the two luckless lovers might be seen waltzing together, apparently in the best of spirits, no man forbidding them. What, in the name of goodness, did it all mean ?

No answer to the general inquiry was to be gleaned from the demeanour of Mr. Gervis, whose features expressed nothing but the most placid satisfaction and urbane welcome of his guests. Mr. Gervis, indeed, was pleased to exhibit himself in an entirely new aspect, and may be said to have achieved the principal success of an evening full of successes. His habitual languor of speech and gait had been laid aside for the nonce, and was replaced by a cheerful, unassuming cordiality and an evident desire to please, which surprised and charmed all with whom he was brought in contact. He spoke to everybody, and had somehow discovered exactly the right thing to say to each ; he managed to be everywhere, without appearing to exert himself; he found partners for the plain girls and comfortable seats for the matrons, and to high and low alike he contrived to convey the impression that he considered

their presence as a favour conferred upon him. Even those who disliked him most were fain to admit that they had never seen finer manners; and in our parts some of us, who are a little behind the age, flatter ourselves that we know what fine manners are. Old Mr. Pettigrew, watching the increasing favour with which the stranger was regarded, grew a little uneasy and fidgety at last, and whispered to a confidential friend that he hoped in Heaven he was not going to be put to the worry and expense of a contested election at his time of life.

But if Mr. Gervis's behaviour seemed to cast some doubts upon the accuracy of recent rumours, still more so did that of Geneviève, whose mien it was impossible to reconcile with the despair of a love-lorn maiden. Hitherto Geneviève had found but few admirers in Lynshire, where blue eyes, rosy cheeks, and *bouches en cœur* are mostly held to be the constituent parts of female loveliness; a few persons only had conceded her to be picturesque and interesting-looking. But that night more than one onlooker was heard to affirm roundly that she was nothing less than beautiful. In truth there is no beautifier like happiness; and if it were not happiness that had

brought such a strange soft light into those brown eyes and that was expressing itself in every movement of the slim girlish figure—why, appearances must be very deceptive. As for Freddy, nobody had ever seen him looking anything but happy for more than five minutes together; so that his radiant face could not be taken to prove much, except indeed in a negative sense, as evidencing the improbability of anything having occurred to disturb his normal state of contentment with himself and the world at large. Taking one thing with another, the inference drawn on all sides was that there had been some mistake, and that, so far from Sir Frederick's suit having been rejected by Mr. Gervis (which, when you came to think of it, was an unlikely story, after all), this ball had been given as a means of publicly announcing the engagement.

Those who reasoned thus had probably not noticed that one actor who had taken a prominent part in the little domestic drama under consideration was nowhere to be seen. On a sofa in a small and dimly-lighted room, removed from the sights and sounds of revelry in which her shaken nerves unfitted her to take any part, sat Lady Croft, and made her moan.

"I am the most unlucky woman in the whole

world; no one *ever* was tried as I am! I am quite accustomed to it—I am sure I don't expect much—I am prepared for disappointment in a hundred forms—but that such a thing as this should happen I *could* not anticipate. Who could? After all the trouble I have taken, after all the encouragement I have had, after seeing everything go so smoothly from beginning to end, to be checkmated at the last moment by that man, who in reality cares no more for his daughter's happiness than he does for mine! If one could believe in anyone's being so wicked, I should say that his sole aim in life was to make others miserable. The only excuse he could give was that his daughter was very young, and that he had learnt by experience that people ought to hesitate a long time before marrying. Of course one knows that he himself doesn't get on with his own wife; but then, as I told him, that is probably entirely his own fault. 'Not a doubt of it,' he answered, as coolly as possible; 'and I should not be surprised if your son failed to get on with *his* wife—also entirely through his own fault.'"

"How impertinent of him!" said Lady Courtney, who, for the time being, was the sorrowing mother's confidant.

"Impertinent is not the word! But that I could forgive; only he is much *worse* than impertinent sometimes. You have no conception of how—how *horrid* that man can make himself. Fancy his telling me in so many words that my selfishness shocked him! Of all things in the world to accuse *me* of selfishness! Not that it matters much what he says or thinks; for I shall never speak to him again after this, if I can avoid it. Freddy declares that he is willing to wait two years, or *any* number of years; but that is absurd. I must begin at once to look out for some one else for him; but I know I shall nowhere find such a dear, good girl as Geneviève. The change she had brought about in my poor boy already was *more* than wonderful. For the last few weeks he has gone to church regularly once on Sundays, and repeated the responses too; for I heard him. And he has taken to reading a good deal, and he smokes much less, and altogether—— But there is an end of it all now." And Lady Croft is compelled to have recourse to her pocket-handkerchief.

"Oh, but you must not despair," said Lady Courtney, who was a good-natured woman, and did not share her husband's antipathy to Freddy. "After all, there are some attach-

ments which survive a separation of two years. I am sure I have heard of many instances in which long engagements have ended happily; and besides——"

"Ah! not in our family," interrupted Lady Croft through her tears. "No Croft ever yet was constant. It is the hereditary taint—oh dear, *why* are people born with hereditary taints!—and they can't help themselves."

"I was going to say that, if the worst came to the worst, Miss Gervis is not absolutely unique. I don't know her myself; but I dare say she is a very charming girl. Still, there are many thousands of other women in England, you know."

"That is just it! There are thousands of others; and some of them are vulgar, and some are vicious, and some have red hair, and some are married already. It is a great deal too much to hope for that such an occasion as this should come again. No; I know what will happen. He will run away with somebody else's wife, or he will marry some dreadful creature whom I could not speak to, or else he will play fast and loose with half a dozen girls, and never marry at all. As for his living through two long years without an affair of some kind, there is not a chance of that. He

may think now that he will; but I know better; and so does that detestable old man."

In this strain Lady Croft went on, refusing to be comforted, and perhaps rather trying the patience of her courteous listener.

But the warnings of this mature Cassandra were poured forth, as has been said, out of ear-shot of the ball-room; and as there was no Miss Pennefather at hand to convey them thither, the impression gained ground that Mr. Gervis's hospitality was intended to celebrate the conclusion of a betrothal.

Admiral Bagshawe, for one, was strongly of this opinion. The Admiral was in high good humour, for he liked, as he said, to see things properly done, and dash him if he had ever tasted better champagne in his life than was to be had in the supper-room. Now it is well known that judging of champagne is mere guess-work until a considerable quantity of it has been swallowed; and the Admiral had conscientiously subjected Mr. Gervis's wine to this crucial test. Towards the end of the evening, therefore, he was ready for anything; and as courage is a quality in which he has never been deficient, his friends were hardly astonished when he proclaimed his intention of beating about the bush no longer, and of

going straight to head-quarters for information. The eyes of the little coterie to which he had been holding forth were starting out of their heads and their ears were pricked up, as their emissary shouldered his way towards the master of the house, and called out in a loud hearty voice—

"Well, Gervis, I hear we're to congratulate you, eh?"

Mr. Gervis cocked his head on one side, smiled amiably, and said, "Indeed?"

"So they tell me. *I* don't know anything about it; but I'm an old stager, and I can see as far through a brick wall as my neighbours." Here the Admiral's right thumb points backwards over his shoulder to the corner where Freddy and Geneviève are seated, side by side, and his right eye executes a slow and solemn wink. "People say it's a case," quoth he.

"Do they really? But what will not people say! You have been misinformed, my dear Admiral Bagshawe; if a 'case' means an engagement, there is not a word of truth in what you have heard."

"The deuce there isn't!" ejaculates the Admiral, a trifle discomfited. "Beg pardon, I'm sure. Have I your authority, then, to contradict these reports?"

"By all means do so, if you think it worth while. Delighted to have had the opportunity of setting you right. Is there any other matter connected with myself or my family upon which I can enlighten you?"

"Eh? No; I don't know that there is," answers the Admiral, staring.

"If you should think of anything else later, pray apply to me without hesitation. Nothing is more flattering than these proofs of the ever-watchful interest which our kind friends and neighbours take in us."

And with that Mr. Gervis moves away, leaving the Admiral to return to his consort and announce that, "The old woman was right, by George! There's no engagement."

"I was sure of it," cried Mrs. Bagshawe triumphantly. "And I must say that I think it is rather bad taste on Sir Frederick's part to show himself here after having been treated in such a way."

"I have my own ideas about that," puts in Major Currie, who is standing beside the lady's chair. "I am not so sure that it is young Croft who has been badly treated. Mind you, this is only conjecture; but I have seen a good deal of him, and a precious slippery customer he is! It would not surprise me to hear that

he had never proposed at all, and didn't mean to propose. When I came here this evening, and saw all the money that was being spent by a man who says that he's going clean out of the neighbourhood in a day or two, I couldn't help being reminded of my old campaigning days in India. When we found it necessary to fall back—as the best of soldiers sometimes have to do, Mrs. Bagshawe—what used our plan to be? Why, we brought the artillery into play, and kicked up the devil's own dust and smoke, and slipped off under cover of it."

"Oh, Major Currie, what a dreadful expression! Do you really think then——"

But perhaps the reader has had enough of these provincial gaffers and gammers, and may not care for any further report of their tittle-tattle. They were only a set of dull-witted, vulgar people, dwelling in a small circle and busying themselves with small matters, in default of better employment. Perhaps they ought rather to be pitied than blamed in that their lives had to be spent in a little country town, instead of (for instance) in London, where the intellectual horizon is so much wider, where petty cliques have no place, and where such things as prying and backbiting and scandal are so exceedingly rare. I don't know that

their gossip did any great harm to anybody. Certainly it was powerless to disturb either Freddy or Geneviève, who looked, and indeed were, as happy as though no shadow of a two years' separation was hanging over them.

The semi-betrothed couple had, in fact, recovered with marvellous rapidity from the first shock of that blow which had reduced Lady Croft to despair. One of them, upon whose spirits a vague dread of the future had preyed more than she was herself aware of, acknowledged in her heart that two years of suspense and weariness was not too heavy a price to pay for a lifetime of contentment; while the other was of so sanguine a temperament that he could not believe in that long period of probation at all.

"I am like a prisoner who has just been sentenced to fifteen years' penal servitude," said he. "I am removed from the dock looking regularly broken-hearted, don't you know; but all the time I am thinking to myself that if I don't get out on a ticket-of-leave before my sentence has half expired, it's a pity. All I have got to do is to behave myself, so as to get a good character from the governor of the gaol —Mr. Gervis, I mean—and to humbug the chaplain—Miss Potts may represent the chap-

lain—and then it will soon be found out that I am not such a ruffian as I look, after all. Don't you see?"

This graceful parallel was drawn in the seclusion of the conservatory, whither Freddy and his partner had retired at the end of the last waltz on the programme. Dancing was still going on, as echoes of distant music told them; but the guests were leaving fast, and when our lovers had quitted the ball-room, it had been with the consciousness that the time for saying last words had come, and that it might be many months before they would be alone together again.

"The chaplain is gained already," said Geneviève, smiling; "but she has very little to say to it, I am afraid; and as for the gaoler——"

The aposiopesis was expressive. But Freddy confidently gave it as his opinion that the gaoler would be all right. "He won't stick out for the whole term when he sees that we're in earnest. He'll make it a year, I expect. Anyhow, it isn't as if we were going to say good-bye now, and not meet again till the year after next, you know. And of course we shall write to each other constantly."

Geneviève shook her head. "We must not

do that. Don't you remember, he said there was to be no correspondence? And you agreed."

"Did I? If I did, it was because I misunderstood him. I never intended to consent to do without letters—oh, I could not possibly live, unless I heard from you sometimes. Of course I shall write at once; and you will answer me, won't you?"

Geneviève sighed. "It would not be any use if you did write to me," she said. "I should not be allowed to have your letter. You know, I shall be living with Varinka all the time, and she would be very angry if she found that we were corresponding. And besides, I should not like her to see what you wrote."

"Do you mean to say that she would open your letters?" exclaimed Freddy, aghast.

"Oh, yes. In England, I know, that is not done; but abroad it is different. Varinka would think she had a perfect right to read any letters addressed to me, and she would be horrified at the idea of my hearing from any young man. She would say it was not *convenable;* and I am not sure that she would not be right."

"Well then, I must live in Paris as much as I can, that's all."

"I am afraid that would not do either. They would never let me see you alone; and don't you think it would seem a little like a breach of faith if you were to follow me? I mean, if we were to meet just as usual, it would be almost the same thing as if we were engaged."

"So we are engaged."

"No;—only in our hearts. *He* said expressly that there was no engagement. Freddy——"

It was the first time that Geneviève had overcome her timidity to the extent of addressing her lover by his Christian name, and never before had that rather undignified diminutive sounded so sweetly in his ears.

"My own!" he whispered.

"Would you mind very much if we did not meet at all till the two years were over?"

"Mind? Good Lord! I should mind it more than anything that I can imagine. Wouldn't you?"

"Yes—in a way. But I could bear it, if I thought it was best; and I do think so. We shall be able to hear of each other in many ways—through Nina, and other people; and I thought perhaps your mother would let me write to her sometimes. Only I am sure it

would be wiser for us not to meet, unless it were really quite by accident. I think they would be much more likely to give in if they saw that being utterly separated made no difference in us. They would believe then that we really cared for one another."

"I suppose that is what Mr. Gervis doubts?"

Geneviève hesitated for a moment. "I suppose so," she said at length, with that constrained intonation which the mention of her father's name always brought into her voice. "But I do not know what it is that he intends or wishes."

"Queer old chap," remarked Freddy, reflectively; "I can't quite make out what he is driving at, I confess."

"He does not choose that any one should make him out. It is his way to obtain what he wants by roundabout means, even when it would be easier and safer to act openly. I am sure he might have prevented Claud's marriage if he had chosen to speak plainly months ago; and he would have given a great deal to prevent it, I believe, for he is really fond of Claud. Me he has never liked nor pretended to like; so I should have thought he would have been thankful for the opportunity of getting me off his hands. He must

have some plan or other, I suppose; but it does not much signify what it is, as it is certain to fail, does it?"

"Not a bit. But, Geneviève, if we are to be all this time without ever seeing one another or exchanging a word, and if you meet lots of fellows in Paris—as of course you will do—who are far and away more worthy of being your husband than I can ever be, won't you—don't you think you might——"

"Fall in love with one of them? No; there is not much fear of that," answered Geneviève, with a little soft laugh. She hardly thought the suggestion worthy of a serious reply.

But when Freddy, who was really alarmed at the prophetic picture which his fancy had conjured up, went on to expatiate upon his own many deficiencies and upon the superior mental and physical attractions of those imaginary suitors, imploring her, almost with tears, not to forget him when he should be far away, she grew troubled, and, regardless of what Miss Potts would have called "proper maidenly reserve," caught his hand in both of hers with a quick movement of pain.

"Don't speak like that!" she cried; "you don't know how you hurt me. Oh, have you not understood? If I thought you had not,

and that you doubted me, I don't know how I could bear to leave you like this. It is not possible to tell you how I feel, and naturally you cannot know. But just think what you are to me. No one ever loved me but you. There is no one like you—no one so good and kind and thoughtful. You are the whole world to me, and you always will be. You believe me, don't you?"

The young fellow was a good deal moved. "What have I done to deserve such love?" he was thinking to himself. "Yes," he said aloud; "I believe you." Then, after a long pause, "And you will not doubt me either?"

"Oh no; I never could."

"Because," said Freddy, getting up and moving about uneasily, "I wanted to tell you—it is an awful thing to have to say, but I must say it—that you would have a right to doubt. My life has not been like yours. I wish to Heaven it had been; but it is too late to think of that now. I have been in love, or at least fancied myself in love, with ever so many people. There was that wretched Miss Lambert, whom you saw, and there were others before her. Shall I tell you about them all?"

"No. I don't want to hear. How could you help what happened before we met? I

love you; I trust you; I am not afraid of your deserting me now. But even if it were so—even if you did not love me any longer, and cared for somebody else, it would make no difference. To the end of my life my heart will belong to you, and to no one but you."

Her father, if he had heard her, might have rejoined, "How can you possibly tell?" Freddy neither said nor thought this; but it crossed his mind that it would be a happy thing for him if he could feel as absolutely sure of himself as she did of them both. For it is not permitted even to the most thoughtless of mortals to have been fickle with impunity; and to talk of letting the dead past bury its dead is only a way of speaking, and perhaps not a very wise way of speaking either.

Howbeit, Freddy felt in his inmost heart that his love for Geneviève was something very different from those bygone philanderings, and that, that being so, there was no real occasion for him to distrust himself. He resumed his seat, and began telling her how, since he had known her, life had acquired a new meaning for him, how he had grown dissatisfied with his old acceptance of the world as a big playground, and how, for her sake, he was trying, and would try, to make something

better out of his life than he had hitherto cared to attempt.

"I'm awfully stupid, you know," he had the modesty to admit. "Book-learning isn't in my line, and it wouldn't be much good my going in for that sort of thing; but I have a certain amount of money, and there's the property to look after, and all that. I don't see why I shouldn't be of some use in my own small way. Anyhow, I don't mean to let things slide any more."

Geneviève did not quarrel with this unambitious programme. It was sweet to her to think that the man whom she loved was made better by her love—so sweet that she listened to him without noticing how time was going on, and was much surprised when Miss Potts came in, with a rather grave face, to say that everybody had gone away, and that the servants were putting out the lights.

CHAPTER XII.

THE RUE D'AMSTERDAM AND THE BOULEVARD MALESHERBES.

"Do you think there were ever before two people as happy as we are?"

The speaker was one of the slowly-moving stream of loiterers which flows up and down the Boulevard des Italiens every night of the year, winter and summer alike. In the clear, frosty atmosphere, in the brilliant light that shone from the street-lamps and the glittering shop-windows, he could distinguish every detail of the figure at his side—the fur-trimmed jacket which fitted her so perfectly, the tiny, exquisitely shaped boots, which Paris alone could have produced, the gloved hand resting upon his arm, the charming upturned face, which met his eyes with a merry smile. Perhaps he read the answer to his question there, for he went on, without waiting for any articulate response—

"It is a realized ideal—at least it is something better than that, for I have got all that I ever dreamt of wishing for, and more besides. There is no place left for castle building. If the reign of the fairies were to begin again, and my own especial fairy-godmother were to appear from round the corner of the rue Louis-le-Grand there all of a sudden, and beg me to command her services, I protest I should have to make the lady a polite bow, and send her about her business. I really don't know what I could find to ask her for."

"A little more money perhaps?"

"Ah, well, a little more money might be a comfortable thing, certainly; and yet I don't know that I should thank her for depriving me of the pleasure of earning it. I am sure I should not, if it were to make any alteration in our way of living. I am absolutely contented; no change could be a change for the better to me. And to think that there are wiseacres going about the world proclaiming that happiness consists only in anticipation and retrospect!"

"People who say such foolish things can never have known the meaning of freedom and a fourth-floor in Paris. Oh, what good times we have had!—what fun it has all been!"

The fun of it had not yet begun to pall upon Mrs. Claud Gervis. After three months of married life, she could enjoy as keenly as she had done on the first day of her arrival in Paris the mitigated Bohemianism for which the French capital offers so many facilities. She had an almost childish delight in the novelty of her lot; in the newly-acquired right to go where she pleased when she pleased; in the theatres to which economically disposed persons might betake themselves on foot, and where evening toilettes were dispensed with; in those little dinners at some restaurant in the Palais Royal or on the boulevards which relieved one of the vulgar cares of housekeeping; in every incident of the bright winter days. For the time being, at all events, these things satisfied her soul. Whether she was prepared to go quite the length that her husband did, and to declare that any conceivable change must be unwelcome to her, may be doubted; but it is certain that her happiness was not, at this time, any less complete than his.

Nor must it be supposed that her joy in life rested solely upon such frivolous bases as those indicated above. There are few women upon whom marriage does not produce at least a temporary change and softening of character;

and Nina, somewhat to her own surprise, discovered that a taste for domesticity was beginning to take root in her heart. She had fallen in love with Claud because of his handsome face, because of his devotedness, because he was so unlike the general run of young Englishmen—for half a dozen more or less inconclusive reasons: she had viewed him from an imaginary level rather above than beneath his own, perceiving her advantages over him in the matters of worldly knowledge and experience. But now she saw him with other eyes; and, whether by reason of closer companionship with him, or of the law of Nature which ordains that the woman shall reverence the man, if by any means she can contrive to do so, Mrs. Claud Gervis's attitude towards her husband was approaching every day more nearly to that enjoined by the apostles and approved by the Church. She began to be ambitious that he should make a name for himself as an author; she watched him with furtive admiration as he sat scribbling at his writing-table; and when a famous review accepted an article from his pen she was so gratified by this honour that the circumstance of its bringing no remuneration with it seemed to her hardly worthy of notice. Sometimes she used to

think that she could ask nothing better than to live for ever this secluded, independent life, seeking no longer for admiration or attention on her own score, and content to shine in the lustre of Claud's reflected glory.

This, however, was hardly more than one of those pretty fancies which will come to idle people dreaming beside a wood fire in the twilight, but which common sense smiles at when daylight comes round again. Nina knew quite well that in due process of time she would have to resume her place in society, to effect a reconciliation between her husband and the head of the family, and to enter upon the fruition of that comfortable income which would doubtless be offered to the young couple, and which would free the pursuit of literature from any debasing taint of a sordid nature. With her own father she had already patched up a peace. Mr. Flemyng, who was too profound a philosopher to cry over spilt milk, and who may also have had a suspicion that his neighbour at Southlands would not prove relentless for ever, had written a long and discursive letter, the purport of which was that, though unable to assist the young people pecuniarily, and *both unable and unwilling to pay outstanding bills* (underlined), he was prepared to offer

them the solace of his blessing—or whatever one of his enlightened school of thought may have considered equivalent thereto. Mr. Gervis had not shown an equal readiness to adapt himself to circumstances, several dutiful missives having failed to elicit anything in the shape of an answer from him; but this, as Claud said, did not prove much—the governor never answered letters—and Nina had little fear but that she should be able to subjugate him when the proper time should come. She was in no great hurry: her chief wish was that this protracted honeymoon might last as long as it could be made to do—pleasure first, business afterwards. At the bottom of her heart she believed herself to be irresistible; and Claud was quite of the same mind.

And it must be admitted that she was not without warrant in rating her powers of fascination highly. Her beauty was of that order which no Gallic heart can withstand. Since her wedding-day, her career had been one uninterrupted triumph; and from M. l'Hérisson to the railway-guard who had hastened to place a coupé at the service of monsieur and madame —from the concierge in the rue d'Amsterdam, where the newly-married pair had taken up their abode, to the Princess Ouranoff, she had

made a facile conquest of all with whom she had been brought into proximity.

Varinka, always prone to be attracted by new faces, and especially by pretty ones, had conceived for Mrs. Claud one of those ardent attachments which, with her, were perpetually springing into being, and vanishing again, like the easily kindled fireworks which make such a prodigious blaze and sputter for a minute or so, and are gone, leaving nothing but darkness and a gaunt skeleton-frame behind them. Her exultation over the act of mutiny which had upset Mr. Gervis's calculations may not improbably have prepossessed her in favour of her new step-daughter; Nina's easy manners and faultless costume did the rest; and the fickle Princess's latest bosom friend was thrown over without compunction in order that the new-comer might be taught to know her Paris and be taken to the shops where she ought to buy her clothes. It was Varinka who pointed out how far better, more amusing and more economical it would be to dine at a quiet restaurant, where one could get an excellent dinner for five francs a head, than to engage an extravagant cook, who would in all probability lie and thieve, and would certainly impest the air with the noisome fumes of her

gigots-à-l'ail. The services of one *bonne*, said she, ought to suffice amply for the wants of two people who would require nothing, except tea and coffee, to be prepared upon the premises. If she had had her way, she would have planted the little household at the top of a brand-new mansion in the Boulevard Haussman; for a good quarter, she averred, was everything, and it was permissible to save money in any direction rather than in that of house rent; but upon this point Claud was obdurate. He declared that he could not afford to pay a high rent and did not care a straw for being fashionable, and to avoid further discussion, went out forthwith, and signed an agreement which put him into possession of a sunny little set of rooms *au quatrième* in the rue d'Amsterdam, which he and Nina had inspected a few days before, and had considered eligible.

The Princess visited her *protégés* as soon as they were installed in this modest domicile, and, despite its situation, was pleased to pronounce not unfavourably upon it. The rooms seemed airy and bright, she said, darting hither and thither, and peeping through every doorway; the furniture, though old, was not in such bad taste; with the addition of a few *bibelots*, the place might be made quite habitable.

The *bibelots* in question turned out to be of a somewhat substantial kind, including, indeed, such articles as sofas, arm-chairs, carpets, and curtains. Returning home, one evening, after a long interview with the editor of the review above-mentioned, Claud found them already in his small *salon*, where they had been arranged with commendable rapidity during his absence. His wife and the Princess were seated luxuriously, with their toes on the fender, sipping that straw-coloured tea which the Russians affect, and into which they customarily drop a slice of lemon in lieu of milk. They seemed much diverted at the air of stupefaction with which he stopped short on the threshold, and at the lugubrious voice in which he inquired how all this was to be paid for.

"You ridiculous boy!" cried the Princess; "Who thinks of paying? We ordered these little necessaries from my own upholsterer, a perfectly well-bred man, who would think himself insulted if you talked of payment within the next two or three years."

Claud looked doubtful. "I don't want to have any bills," he said. "I should like to pay ready money for everything that I buy."

At this innocent avowal both ladies laughed with charming heartiness. Ready money

indeed!—why, the thing was not only absurd, but literally impossible. How could a man pay his tailor ready money, for instance? How was a woman to pay her dressmaker, when the dressmaker herself could not tell what the cost of executing an order would be until it was carried out? Did he mean to suggest that his wife should purchase her gowns at a ready-made establishment?

Claud protested that he was not guilty of any such enormity. He would fain avoid running into debt; that was all.

"Everybody is in debt," said the Princess cheerfully. "Look at me: I owe for everything I possess—for my carriage, my horses, my bonnets, my gloves—everything! And I assure you that I do not feel myself any the worse."

Claud did not believe her. As a general rule, it was safe to treat Varinka's statements as apocryphal, and those who knew her best might be excused for saying of her, as Talleyrand said of Metternich, "qu'elle mentait toujours et ne trompait jamais." But in this instance, as it happened, she was telling the simple truth. Lavish, generous in a certain semi-barbarous fashion, scattering her money broadcast, without too much regard to the persons who might chance to pick it up, she

had long passed in Paris for a woman of great wealth. It was commonly reported that she had silver mines—in the Ural mountains—in Siberia—somewhere beyond civilization's ken—whence a steady stream flowed ever westward to replenish her purse. Such was the impression which prevailed regarding the Princess among people of her own class; inquiries made in other sections of society might have revealed the existence of a somewhat different notion. Her tradesmen, for instance, knew to their cost that it was very seldom convenient to her to pay; and if they continued to serve her, and to content themselves with occasional small instalments of the money owing to them, it was probably because they had ascertained that she had a rich husband in the background, to whom, as a last resource, appeal might be made. Her bankers, again, though they could have shown that the amounts paid in annually to the lady's credit were more than sufficient to justify the scale upon which her establishment was kept up, could also have testified that her account was pretty generally overdrawn. What became of those handsome balances which, making due allowance for depredations, carelessness and extravagance, should have remained to the Princess after the discharge of

what may be called her legitimate expenses? A few—a very few only—of her associates might have answered the question by a conjecture. It was well known among the members of a certain set that the Princess was a passionate gambler; but not many could have told what were the stakes for which she and a limited number of her friends of both sexes were wont to play in that pretty little card-room in the Boulevard Malesherbes, where lights were often kept burning until after sunrise. Few and far between were the nights on which this snug apartment was not illuminated. The Princess would hasten thither, on her return from the opera or from a ball, either accompanied or closely followed by sundry choice spirits who shared her tastes; and whether she won or lost at the game, it is certain that she never wearied of it.

Geneviève, in earlier years, used to feel a child's curiosity as to what took place in that Bluebeard's chamber; Miss Potts used sometimes to venture upon a respectful remonstrance against the iniquities of which it was the surmised scene; neither of them was ever permitted to cross its threshold. And it should be set down to the credit of the feather-brained little Princess that, whatever may have been her

own vices, she kept them religiously concealed from her step-daughter, and held up before the eyes of the latter a standard of conduct as unexceptionable as her lights enabled her to frame. It was with unfeigned joy that she welcomed Geneviève back to Paris; with even greater delight did she reach the conviction that her charge had returned to her free. For Geneviève was reserved, and did not care to reveal the secrets of her heart to Varinka, merely pledging her word that she was not engaged to the young English baronet about whom she was asked so many questions. Thus reassured, Varinka prepared to extend the right hand of fellowship to Miss Potts, by whom it is needless to say that it was eagerly grasped. Miss Potts was forgiven, embraced, and—cross-examined. Then—for unfortunately the witness was one of the worst hands at keeping her own counsel that ever lived—the true state of affairs was elucidated, and a stormy scene followed. Many recriminations had to be undergone, and not a few tears shed, before Miss Potts could be once more pardoned and the Princess brought to see that no serious mischief had been done as yet.

"Two years—it is a long time! The essential thing is that they should be prevented

from holding any sort of communication together for the present; and I will charge myself with that," said the little woman, nodding her head resolutely. "For the rest, at her age one forms fancies and forgets them again without much difficulty. This Englishman has been the first who has made love to her—there you have the explanation of it all. From what you tell me, Potts, there is nothing about him that can leave a lasting impression upon her. What we must seek for is a man whose disposition corresponds in some degree to her own. There is a weak place, or a strong place—I don't know which you would call it—in every one's character, and when once one has found it, one knows where to aim. It is evident that we must make a plunge into the world of amateur musicians."

She began to run over the list of her acquaintance *sotto voce*.

"D'Arblay—perfectly *comme-il-faut*, a little advanced in years perhaps. De Sancy—a divine voice, but no fortune. Jaworisky—what a ridiculous spectacle is a man who plays the flute!—it is enough to kill you with laughing. A good *parti*, however. Boisonnet—de Castelnau——"

"Don't you think," broke in Miss Potts

feebly, "that our dear child's happiness should be the chief object?"

The Princess stamped her little foot impatiently. "Potts, you are of a stupidity beyond bearing! Of what then do you suppose that I am thinking? Do I plot and plan, like *him?* Have I anything to gain by marrying Geneviève, and sending her away from me? And if I wish to see her happily established, and at the same time to keep her within reach, is that any great crime? Listen—I have nothing left in the world to care for but her. Rather than make her miserable, I would surrender her to this Englishman to-morrow; but if I can discover a good husband and a happy home for her in Paris, where I can be near her and see her sometimes, I mean to do it. And in saying that, I say no more than any mother would do."

There is no reason to doubt the speaker's honesty. Hers was one of those natures which can fling aside a friend or a lover easily enough, but which cannot endure to be in their turn deserted. She would give herself infinite pains to reconquer the affection of persons for whom she did not in the least care, if only she suspected that her charms were beginning to pall upon them; and that Geneviève could con-

template with equanimity the prospect of an establishment so far away as the other side of the channel had struck her as a truly shocking thing. Add to this that it was quite true that she was alone in the world, that she did in all sincerity love Geneviève as warmly as she was capable of loving, and that she was well aware that of all her so-called dear friends there was but this one who might be counted upon to stand by her in adversity and prosperity alike.

"It is a refuge against the bad time coming that I wish to prepare for myself," she admitted candidly to Geneviève one evening; and when asked to what bad time she alluded, answered oracularly that it was impossible to read the future, and that disaster was never very far away from any one. "Supposing some great misfortune were to happen to me—supposing I were to find myself forsaken on every side, you would not forbid me your house, would you? You would not shut your door in my face?"

"You know I never would, Varinka. What makes you say such things? If ever I have a house of my own, it shall be your home as long and as often as you like to make it so; and surely you might know me better than to think

that I should turn against you at a time when you were in trouble."

"Ah, bah!" returned the Princess, with a short laugh; "a house implies a husband; and husbands are not too fond of providing their wives' relations with homes. I am not exacting to such an unreasonable extent: all I ask is to be allowed to see you from time to time—not to be left quite alone. Promise me that, whatever happens, you will never consent to let me pass entirely out of your life."

The girl promised, wonderingly. She was unable to see any specific reason for so singular a demand; but she knew, or believed she knew, that her father would gladly seize any opportunity that might offer to shake off even the slender tie that still bound him to his wife, and she presumed that it must be some such eventuality as this that Varinka was contemplating. As regarded herself, she would fain have added a hint that the only house over which she could ever exercise sway as a wife would be Croft Manor; that the future offered her but two alternatives—marriage with the man whom she loved, or spinsterhood; and that, consequently, the calling together of young men with long hair and violins under their arms from all quarters of Paris was so much

labour lost. But Varinka was so fractious when crossed, and made such long and agitating scenes if she did not get what she wanted, that it seemed wisest, upon the whole, to keep silence and submit to be bored to death.

It was at this time that the occupants of the *entresol* beneath the Princess's suite of rooms in the Boulevard Malesherbes began to suffer much annoyance from the scraping, twanging and tootling which took place nearly every evening directly over their heads. Varinka, in prosecution of her scheme, had decided upon holding a series of sociable little meetings, during the winter months, for the ostensible object of bringing amateur musicians together. The notion was a disinterested one, since she herself detested instrumental music, not to say music of all kinds, *opéra bouffe* excepted; and it subsequently obtained its just recompense in the complete success of the assemblies, so far as numbers were concerned. They descended upon the Boulevard Malesherbes, those amateurs, like a flight of woodcock in autumn, when the north-west wind is blowing—de Sancy, d'Arblay, Jaworisky with his flute, and a host of others. Some were old frequenters of the Princess's *salons*, some were brought thither for the first time by friends. Varinka smiled

upon them all, swallowing her yawns, and congratulated herself upon having at least furnished her step-daughter with a sufficiency of samples of the required genus to choose between; but Geneviève found this society not a little burdensome. After the perfectly natural and unassuming demeanour of Freddy Croft and others like him, these artistic gentlemen, with their waxed moustaches, their long white fingers, their airs and graces and affectations, seemed to her intolerable. The compliments which they showered upon her whenever she took up her violin, failed to please her, and their own performances made her long to stop her ears. For all the time she wanted to be alone, to think about the absent one, to wonder where he was, and what he was doing, and whether he, too, was thinking of her, all those miles away. The ordeal was a harder one than she had expected it to be. The sense of loneliness was strong upon her, and there was no one to whom she could speak upon the subject nearest to her heart; for Varinka was against her, with Nina she had never been able to hit it off, and the loyal Potts considered it her duty both to Mr. Gervis and the Princess to refrain from any sign or hint that might influence her ex-pupil's choice.

There remained Claud, who, to be sure, was warmly on her side, and who had managed to speak a word or two of encouragement to her; but he naturally devoted to his wife all the time that he could spare from his literary labours, and these had latterly claimed a large portion of his days and nights. For it was now well known in the rue d'Amsterdam, in the Boulevard Malesherbes, and elsewhere, that Claud was at work upon a play—upon *the* play, in point of fact, which was to enchant the public, astound the critics, and start its author upon the high road to fortune and glory. It would have been too much to expect of a man thus pressing towards the distant temple of Fame that he should pause long to condole with a younger sister upon troubles of a sentimental nature.

CHAPTER XIII

PRIVATE CRITICISM.

Of all forms of composition the dramatic is that which offers the greatest seductions to a tyro who would fain reach celebrity by a short cut, and whom necessity compels to use his art as a profession. Poets sing in the wilderness, and may sing loudly and long before people will turn round to listen to them; of novelists there is a superabundance all the world over, and of these the French reading public has its own favourites, and is not over-ready to recognize the claims of fresh aspirants upon its notice; but the theatre, demanding no weary period of apprenticeship, brings the author directly face to face with the audience which he seeks to please, and a successful first effort at a good Parisian house means not only present emoluments, but something like an assured future.

Present emoluments, as Claud was beginning to find out, were highly to be desired in his case. It was all very well to be allowed to contribute occasional sonnets or articles to the *Revue du Monde Littéraire;* but tradesmen's bills, alas! were not to be discharged after this fashion; nor could he flatter himself that a second volume of poems was likely to prove any more remunerative than his first had done. It was, therefore, not unnatural that he should turn his attention to the drama, and ask himself whether there were any good reason why he should fail where others, who certainly had no title to be considered geniuses of the first order, had achieved results at once so brilliant and so lucrative. He had no overweening vanity; he did not imagine himself to be an Augier, a Sardou, or a Dumas *fils;* but, after carefully perusing the works of these famous dramatists, he did venture to conclude that he might, without too much presumption, endeavour to follow in their footsteps. He knew that he had a fair command of language, some powers of conception, and a certain degree of insight into character. He knew, also, that something more than this was required to make a successful playwright; but as to this last essential, experience alone could decide

whether he possessed it or not, and to experience he was resolved to appeal. Accordingly, he laid in a fresh stock of foolscap paper, and set to work.

Nina was greatly pleased when she heard in what direction her husband's commanding talents were about to be utilized. Her dream of self-effacement remained with her still; but she was not one of those who can possess their souls in patience, and she had secretly chafed under the prospect of a long duration of obscurity for Claud. Also that craving for enjoyment and excitement which was part and parcel of her nature had latterly begun to reassert itself, as it was inevitably certain to do in the long run. The theatre, with its scenic effects both on and off the stage, its visible triumphs and audible plaudits, appeared to provide a safety-valve for instincts of whose strength no one was more conscious than Nina herself.

And here she found a ready sympathizer in the volatile little lady of the Boulevard Malesherbes. Varinka, who had a hundred different ways of occupying her leisure moments, seldom had time or inclination to open a book, and had hardly understood Nina's exultation over the circumstance that Claud had got an

unpaid-for article into the *Revue du Monde Littéraire;* but of the stage and the glories connected with it, of first representations and talented authors, in accurate evening dress, bowing their acknowledgments from a private box, she did happen to know something, having scores of times paid highly for the privilege of witnessing such scenes; and on hearing of Claud's aspirations, she at once declared her approval of them and her readiness to do all that lay in her power towards bringing them to a favourable issue. She had a notion that the production of plays was very much a matter of favour—that it was of the greatest importance to a beginner to have some acquaintance with the masters of his craft; and just as, a few weeks before, she had ransacked Paris to find amateur musicians for her step-daughter's benefit, so now she sent out emissaries to all points of the compass in search of eminent literary persons. To some knights of the pen —a fighting journalist, a fashionable novel-writer, a poet who had missed fire—she was able to introduce Claud without delay. These were occasional attendants at the little gambling parties to which allusion has been made, and being all of them anxious above everything to pass for fine gentlemen and dilettanti, were

not disposed to dwell much upon the subject of their calling or to encourage a novice with hopes of making money at it. They were very civil; they conversed with Claud upon all kinds of topics, save that of literature, for five minutes or so after their introduction to him; and then, having ascertained that monsieur did not play games of chance, slipped away towards the little room that we know of, and happened to be looking in the other direction the next evening that they met the embryo dramatist. Soon, however, other men of letters, big fish and little fish, began to drop in at those unceremonious evening assemblies which could hardly be called parties, since no formal invitation was ever sent out for them, but which were often so numerously attended that the street below was blocked with a long line of carriages. The Princess never had any difficulty in filling her rooms. She was not in the least particular as to whom she admitted, and it was an oddly-assorted crowd that came to pay its respects to her twice a week. Scowling refugees from foreign countries rubbed elbows there with the representatives of their several governments; French generals found themselves confronted with warriors from the other side of the Rhine; high political person-

ages, with stars and ribbons and strings of little jewelled orders dangling from brochettes, looked in on their way to some state reception at the Élysée; Englishmen, Americans, Italians, specimens of all the divers nationalities which Paris attracts, were equally welcome to the indiscriminate hospitality of the little lady who had contrived to make herself liked by every one of them. It was whispered that she was in the pay of the Russian government, and was able, through social influences, to furnish information of a most valuable kind to her Embassy; and although there was no truth in the report, it served to invest her with a certain importance in the eyes of some of her guests and in a measure to increase her popularity among them. She did not put herself to much pains to entertain them—nor indeed were such pains called for; for there was an increasing ebb and flow of the stream upon her staircase, few remaining long, and every one going away when he was so minded—but she had the knack of pleasing; she was pretty, lively, clever even, in the sense of being always ready with a reply, and with a smart saying upon occasion; and, above all, she gave herself no airs.

Claud, who wanted his evenings for work,

was not a very constant attendant at these gatherings; but it happened that, upon one occasion, when Nina had been dining in the Boulevard Malesherbes, he came in late to fetch her away, and was instantly pounced upon by Varinka, who declared that she had been anxiously awaiting his arrival for more than an hour.

"If you had not appeared, I should never have forgiven you," she cried. "I have some one here to-night whom you must absolutely know. Do you see him over there, talking to the woman in black velvet? That is Poinsot —tbe great Eugène himself. Come and be presented to him at once."

Claud, as he made his bow, stole a rapid glance at the most successful, if not the greatest of modern French dramatic authors. Eugène Poinsot, whose first play took the Parisians by storm twenty years ago, and whose reputation has done nothing but increase ever since, was a short, stout man, with a good-natured, smooth-shaven face and a shock of black hair, which stood up straight from his forehead, and was but slightly sprinkled with grey. He held out his hand to the young man in a friendly way, and said he was delighted to make the acquaintance of the author of "Par-ci, par-là."

"I have read your verses, monsieur—charming! charming! May we not look for something fresh from your pen before long? When one possesses your talents one has not the right to let them rust."

Claud replied, with a laugh, that the reception accorded by the public to his last volume had sufficiently convinced him that poetry was not his vocation.

"Ah! the public—yes, yes; it is too true. The public is dull and slow to appreciate work that appears under a new name. I do not wonder that you are discouraged. But it is a pity—upon my honour, it is a pity! Is it a fact, as I have been informed, that you have published an English edition of your poems, and that you are a composer in two tongues?"

"That was not a difficult matter," Claud answered modestly. "I was taught both English and French as a child; I have spoken the one language as much as the other all my life, and now I hardly know which to call my own."

"But it is a phonomenon—a veritable phenomenon! The man who has command of two languages to the extent of being able to write and speak as readily in the one as in the other

is twice over a man. You should have a great future before you, monsieur."

Not until long afterwards did Claud discover that it was this civil-spoken gentleman's unvarying rule to laud his *confrères* to the skies. Poinsot admitted as much to him when their acquaintance was one of several years' standing, by which time circumstances had enabled Claud to hear the confession without danger of wounded self-love. "I am obliged to say something about his works to a man who has written; he would never forgive me if I were to keep silence; and it is easier and pleasanter to praise than to criticise. Naturally, one result of my method is that I have been more or less found out, and that my good word does not count for much. Another is that I pass for the most good-natured man in France, and that those who profess to laugh the most at my verdicts end by accepting a good part of them, as applied to their own writings. The generality of men are nothing but big children, who prefer sweetmeats, which cannot do them any good and may make them ill, to the black draught which their health requires."

It is certain that Claud swallowed the first instalment of M. Poinsot's sweetmeats with no small gusto. Modesty and gratification com-

bined prevented him from returning any very coherent reply. He murmured something about *laudari a laudato*, and expressed a hope that if, in his next effort, he should be tempted into essaying another form of composition, he might be equally fortunate in earning M. Poinsot's approval.

"Count upon it in advance," cried the great man, without intentional irony. "*Apropos*, it has been whispered to me that you are engaged upon a comedy. That is so? Come—so much the better! It is needless for me to tell you that plays, like all other things in this world, stand or fall by their own merits; but there are ways in which an old hand at the trade may help a young one. Command me, if at any time you should think I could be of service to you." He waved Claud's expression of gratitude airily aside with an outward sweep of his large white hand. "Thank me when I shall have done something to deserve your thanks," quoth he magnanimously.

It was not, in truth, without reason that Eugène Poinsot was accounted the most good-natured man in France. Having been blessed all his life with good fortune and a robust digestion, he had no cause for feeling otherwise than kindly towards his fellow-men. His joyous

nature delighted in the environment of happy faces; and if, when some poor devil of his acquaintance fell upon evil times, he preferred sending him money to visiting him, it was only because he could not endure the sight of misery. His friendliness towards Claud arose, no doubt, in a measure, out of sheer kindness of heart: it is also possible that, being a martyr to feminine fascinations, he may have been anxious to do the charming Princess Ouranoff a good turn: lastly, his praise of our hero's poems had not been altogether insincere. He had detected in them a felicity of expression and, every now and again, a touch of original thought, which had seemed to hold out hopes of better things for the future; and indeed it may as well be stated here that, despite the coldness of its first reception, the French edition of Claud's work has, in these latter days, attained a sale which, according to the humble notions of some of his friends, is somewhat out of proportion to its deserts.

Poinsot, then, took our young author in hand, and proved himself in the sequel to be no despicable ally. He introduced him into a fashionable club; he made him acquainted with a larger circle of literary men than were at the Princess's beck and call; finally, he took him,

one day, to the Théâtre du Colisée, and presented him to M. Leroux, the director, a melancholy-looking personage upon whom the announcement that M. Poinsot's friend was a poet, and would shortly have a piece to submit to the Parisian public, did not seem to produce any pleasurable impression.

"Not a piece in verse, I hope," said M. Leroux.

Claud hastened to reassure him by stating that his piece would be in prose, and in the most modern of prose. It was nothing more than a drama of every-day life that he had undertaken, he said.

"Ah!" M. Leroux did not presume to dictate; but perhaps he might be permitted to say that there were certain points to be kept in mind by every one who undertook to write dramas relating to every-day life, and that neglect of any one of them was apt to prove fatal. "Draw as much as possible from the life, monsieur; avoid intricacy of plot; emphasize details; above all, steer clear of fine phrases. If you will do me the honour to forward me your piece, when finished, I will promise you to consider it carefully; and by paying attention to the points which I have taken the liberty of bringing to your notice,

you may succeed in producing something which will take the fancy of the public. As for me, I shall esteem myself happy, should it be in my power to oblige a friend of M. Poinsot's."

Such a success as the manager prognosticated certainly did not seem to be beyond the reach of a moderate ambition. "He is no enthusiast, this good Leroux," remarked Poinsot, getting up, with a laugh. "One soon ceases to be so in his trade. No matter!—he is not the less eager to secure a good play when he has the chance."

With that Mentor and Telemachus took their leave, M. Leroux accompanying them to the door, and reiterating, as a last word of warning, "Above all, monsieur, no fine phrases!"

If the taking of infinite pains be the most certain means of attaining a desired end, the prospects of Claud's play should have been reassuring. Mindful of M. Leroux's advice, he studied carefully from the life, spending hours in society which was not much to his taste for the sake of familiarizing himself with the tendency of thought and turns of speech common among the people whom he wished to depict; he resolutely eliminated, both from his plot and his dialogue, all that seemed to savour

ever so slightly of extravagance; he pondered over each sentence, and did not hesitate to sacrifice the work of days if, upon re-perusal, it struck him as unsatisfactory. It was a weary task; but he faced it patiently, feeling that its importance as bearing upon his future could not be overrated.

In the meantime all this pre-occupation was little by little bringing the death-blow to the idyllic life of the rue d'Amsterdam. Claud and Nina were experiencing the common lot of mankind—

> "Die Leidenschaft flieht,
> Die Liebe muss bleiben;
> Die Blume verblüht,
> Die Frucht muss treiben—"

They had reached that period of their life's voyage in which so many make shipwreck; that time of trial in which fancy—poor, pretty fancy, which has little to do with a work-a-day world like this—has to be purged away, that it may be seen whether love lies beneath it or no; and if one of them was unconscious that he was passing through any crisis, the other recognized it plainly enough. From the nature of the case it must always be the woman who suffers most from this sort of inevitable awakening, this dismal discovery that—

"Love—at least this love of one for one—
Is, at the best, not all beneath the sun—"

The husband has other things to think of; business to attend to; work—or pleasure, elevated to the rank of work—which takes him out into the world, and keeps him engaged. It is the wife who must sit at home and think sadly of the golden days of idleness gone, never to return.

Now, if there was one occupation for which Mrs. Claud Gervis was less qualified by nature than another, it was precisely that of sitting at home and mourning. When she realized that playtime was over; that there were to be no more snug little dinners on the Boulevard (for this hand-to-mouth kind of life had been found incompatible with the exigencies of mental labour, and a cook had been engaged for the young couple); no more pleasant days spent in dawdling among the trees of Saint-Germain or along the alleys of Versailles—when, in a word, she found that her dream had melted into thin air, after the manner of dreams, she accepted the changed order of things without outward repining, and determined to seek such legitimate amusements as lay within her reach rather than spend long, solitary hours in grieving over the inevitable. It was some

consolation to her to feel that the disillusion which she had foreseen from the first, and of which she had warned Claud in the autumn woods long ago, was coming through no fault of hers. She was not so foolish as to remind him of her prophecy or to point out its approaching fulfilment. When Claud looked up from his writing to say what good times they would have when spring came round again and his task was done—when he sketched out some vague plan for spending the summer in the depths of the forest of Fontainebleau, and declared that, if this first effort of his should turn out well, he would give himself a holiday of at least six weeks, she smiled, and did not contradict him. But she knew full well that no forest solitudes would ever see her and her husband alone together again. And was it not a fact full of significance that he never raised the faintest objection to her entering society under the Princess's wing, to her attending balls, concerts and receptions evening after evening, and returning home in the grey light of dawn? He seemed quite contented to hear descriptions of all these brilliant entertainments the next day, and to feel no sort of regret at being precluded from taking part in them himself.

The truth is that Nina led a bright and merry existence during those winter months, and only lamented the loss of the ideal life at intervals. The Paris of the Parisians pleased her no less than that out-door Paris which offers so smiling a welcome to strangers had done; and the liking was reciprocal. At the gatherings to which she was taken almost every night by the Princess she was even more surrounded than was that popular lady herself. Her dress, her manners, everything about her —even to her English accent—were pronounced charming; her only defect was that she had a husband. "*Et encore!*"—as the Princess whispered, behind her fan, to one of her own admirers.

There was no rivalry between these ladies. Each had her own circle of slaves; their different styles of beauty rendered them excellent foils to one another; and Varinka, with her white skin and childish face, had no need to be jealous of Nina's advantage over her in point of youth. The two of them entirely eclipsed Geneviève—who, for that matter, was quite content to be eclipsed. The society which Mrs. Gervis found so agreeable failed to attract her; she drew odious comparisons between the fatuous, faultlessly got-up young

gentlemen who were its chief ornaments, and their less polished but more human equivalents on the other side of the channel; and her best evenings were those on which she was allowed to remain at home with Miss Potts, while the others drove away to display their pretty faces and their fresh toilettes at half a dozen different houses. It was then that the violin was taken out of its case, and strange fantasias, such as the Princess's musical friends had never been privileged to listen to, were performed.

Late one afternoon, in the twilight hour before dinner-time, the four persons above mentioned were sitting round a cheerful fire. Varinka and Nina, gloved and bonneted, their furs flung back from their shoulders, were morally vivisecting the ladies whom they had found at home in the course of a round of ceremonious visits. Geneviève, gazing dreamily at the glowing logs, took no part in the conversation, which only reached her ears by snatches. Miss Potts, bolt upright in her chair, was equally silent. Miss Potts seldom opened her lips in the presence of Mrs. Gervis, of whom she strongly disapproved, not more on account of her scandalous behaviour in eloping from her father's house than of her present apparent negligence of a wife's domestic duties. Pre-

sently the click of a closing door was heard from the other end of the room, and a man's figure, dark and shadowy in that half-light, was seen advancing, hat in hand, across the thick carpet. The Princess rose; and then, as the new-comer drew near enough to be recognized, she uttered a little shriek. "You!"

"Myself, madame. The Marseilles express brought me here this morning, and, as you see, I have lost no time in reporting my arrival to you."

Geneviève fancied that she had heard the voice before, but the fire-light did not reach to the height of the speaker's face; and a long grey overcoat and trousers of the same colour, terminating in a very neat little pair of shiny leather boots, might have belonged to anybody.

"I have left——" he resumed; but here he was interrupted by a prolonged fit of coughing, which forced him to sink down into the nearest chair, and then the features of M. Hirsch became plainly visible. "I apologize most humbly for making such a horrible noise," said he faintly, as soon as he was able to speak. "I can only beg you to believe that I do not do it for pleasure. For the last week my life has been one long apology, for I have scarcely ceased coughing from morning to night."

"And you have left the south in that state! What imprudence!" ejaculated the Princess.

"Dear madame, you are aware that prudence has never been one of my numerous virtues. But is not that Miss Gervis whom I see?"

Geneviève got up, and shook hands with the man whom she had met last in such evil case. Fortune had smiled upon M. Hirsch since then, seemingly; for he was well dressed, a large turquoise ornamented his little finger, and the stick upon which he leant was mounted in gold.

"What! you are already acquainted?" exclaimed Varinka. And then—"Ah, to be sure. What am I thinking of? I had forgotten."

There was a short pause. "Mademoiselle was very good to me when I was in England," said M. Hirsch gravely. "I have not forgotten her kindness."

Then came another rather uncomfortable pause; after which Geneviève, for want of something better to say, remarked, "You have come from the south?"

"From Nice, mademoiselle."

"Which you ought never to have left," put in the Princess, reproachfully.

"Which circumstances have compelled me to leave. Nice is a delightful residence. One

breathes a balmy air there; one has a sea which is always blue, a sun which is always warm, a cosmopolitan society—all that the heart of man can desire. Unhappily, the place has one fatal drawback; it is situated within a short and easy journey of the principality of Monaco."

"Ah!"

It was from Varinka's lips that this pregnant monosyllable fell.

Hirsch turned towards her with raised shoulders and hands outspread. "Alas! madame, the old story! I have never had any luck in my life."

"You have not broken the bank, then?" asked Varinka carelessly. But it struck Geneviève that her voice was a trifle tremulous.

"On the contrary, madame; the bank has broken me. A complete defeat all along the line! Cleaned out, my dear lady—empty!"—here he made as though he would turn his pockets inside out—"literally empty!" Another violent coughing-fit interrupted him. "Being unable to live down there without playing," he went on, "and being unable to play without money, I have returned to Paris, which is as good a place to die in as another. I have returned to die at your feet, madame," he

added, turning to Varinka with a bow and a grin. The man's sunken cheeks and wasted form added such emphasis to this ghastly pleasantry that Nina, for one, began to find the situation unbearable. It seemed to her by no means impossible that he might carry out his threat, and die there and then. She jumped up, and withdrew, after bidding everybody a hasty good-night. Not, however, before M. Hirsch had expressed a polite desire to renew his acquaintance with her husband. "Of whose growing celebrity as an author," said he, "I have heard a great deal. We are not left altogether without the news of the day at Nice; and it will be a great satisfaction to me if I am able to assist at the production of Mr. Gervis's first play, and to add my small tribute to the general applause."

To judge by his looks, he was not likely to be present at that, or any other earthly scene in three months' time, which was the earliest date at which Claud anticipated that his piece could be put upon the stage. Nina went home, and reported to her husband that that ragged man who had appeared at Southlands in the summer had turned up again, decently clothed, this time, but penniless and in the last stage of consumption, and that she

really believed he had only come to Paris to entreat the Princess to give him decent burial.

Subsequently, however, it appeared that M. Hirsch was neither so ill nor so destitute as he had represented himself to be. He continued to cough in a most distressing manner, but he did not seem to draw nearer to death; while that he had still some means left was sufficiently proved by his engaging rooms at an expensive hotel and setting up a hired brougham, in which he had himself driven regularly once, and sometimes twice a day to the Boulevard Malesherbes. Before he had been ten days in Paris he had become a recognized appendage of the Princess's household, where no one any longer treated him as a visitor or thought it necessary to entertain him. He had his own chair by the fireside; and there he would often sit, alone and idle, the whole afternoon through, his wasted hands lying loosely clasped upon his knee and his little colourless eyes blinking at the flames. At such times he had a patient, submissive look which lent a touch of pathos to his rather ignoble cast of countenance. Geneviève, who came in, once or twice, and found him sitting thus all by himself, felt her heart moved with pity for the friendless man, and used to say a

kind word or two to him, for which he was almost ridiculously grateful. She thought him much changed for the better since the summer. Certain things there were about him, it was true, which were not susceptible of alteration or improvement—such were his sharp, wolf-like teeth, his shallow eyes, and the abnormally-shaped skull which Providence had seen fit to place upon his shoulders — but respectable clothing did something for him; and to Geneviève at least his manner was always gentle and respectful. Towards others he bore himself less amiably. It was as though he had learnt that the world was against him, and being too worn out to fight any longer, showed his contempt for the hostility of mankind by a perpetual veiled sneer, which made itself felt even in his most ordinary and civil phrases. Hence he was tolerated, rather than liked, in the small circle into which he had chosen to intrude, and Varinka, though affecting to treat him as an old friend, was obviously ill at ease in his presence, and lost no opportunity of urging him to return to a climate better suited to his state of health.

She had a disconnected, mysterious story ready to satisfy the curiosity of those who made inquiries about him. She had known

him from her childhood. He belonged to a noble Russian family—he had had misfortunes. For the rest, an excellent, worthy man; but, (raising her finger to her forehead), a little touched on the question of politics. "He took it into his head to advocate democratic principles; and with us, you understand, when a man adopts democratic principles— You would be astonished if I were to tell you how many members of our highest families are wandering about the world now under assumed names. But it is not well to chatter over much about such things. For my part, I love my fellow-countrymen wherever I find them, and I do not ask whether their opinions are the same as my own. I should be more than ashamed of myself if I were to turn the cold shoulder to one whom I have known all my life because he is no longer what he once was."

This language was felt to be highly creditable to the Princess, who, indeed, had ever professed (whether sincerely or not no one knew, and it did not greatly signify) a somewhat ostentatious sympathy with oppressed patriots and a readiness to throw open her doors to the victims of despotism.

M. Hirsch, then, was accepted as a necessary incubus; and if he was sometimes a little in the

way during the daylight hours, it might be set against that that he was always ready to take a hand at baccarat, when evening came, and to lose his money without a frown. One thing was clear; that he had no intention of moving from Paris.

The days and weeks passed on; winter gave place to the cold winds and showers and sunshine of spring; the chestnut trees in the gardens of the Tuileries put forth their leaves; and at last, one fine morning, when Nina was standing in her drawing-room, superintending the arrangement of a small cart-load of plants which she had purchased in the flower-market by the Madeleine, Claud marched in, with a triumphant mien, and, dashing down a pile of manuscript upon the table, cried, "It is done!"

It was done. The play upon which so many anxious hours of labour had been spent, which had been altered, corrected and revised with hopes and misgivings known only to its author, lay there, finished at length and neatly copied out, and big with the fate of the two innocents who stood looking at it. Nina felt her breath coming quickly as she gazed at that insensible heap of closely-written sheets upon the destiny of which such weighty issues depended.

"Are you satisfied with it?" she asked eagerly. "Do you think it is good?"

Claud shook his head. "I haven't the most distant idea. I have pored over the wretched thing till I know every word of it by heart; and now I can no more judge of it than I could of a piece that I had never seen. Sometimes I think it will go down; sometimes I am convinced that it is the very dullest stuff that ever was written. Well, we shall be put out of our pain to some extent before to-morrow morning. Varinka has promised me the use of her drawing-room this evening to read it to a score or so of people; and if they report favourably upon it, there will be that much gained."

It was M. Poinsot who had insisted upon this preliminary ordeal, which Claud, for his part, would gladly have dispensed with. "It will give you courage," the elder man had said. "Afterwards you will have to read your work to a less friendly audience, and you will not do it the worse if you are free from nervousness and have the echoes of a *bravo* or two in your ears."

That some guarantee against nervousness was called for Claud himself was forced to confess not many hours later. He has since assured his present biographer that never in all his life has he experienced anything like the

sickening sense of discomfiture and dismay that fell upon him when he seated himself at the little table in the Princess's drawing-room, upon which a pair of candles, a glass of water and the famous play had been placed in readiness for him. And yet it was not a very formidable audience that he was asked to face. Poinsot, smiling encouragement from his arm-chair in the front rank beside the Princess; Geneviève, Nina, and a sprinkling of other ladies; a couple of celebrated authors, whose sympathy might be supposed to be quickened by their own memories of the agony attendant upon a first plunge; the fire-eating journalist of whom mention has been made; a few literary stars of the fourth or fifth magnitude, and a ruck composed of the gilded youth which frequented the house—all these were well-disposed towards the beginner, and asked for nothing better than to be given an opportunity of testifying their good-will. But in truth it was not so much of them as of the sound of his own voice that Claud was afraid. However, there was no possibility of drawing back at that advanced stage of the proceedings, so he gulped down half his glass of water, dropped his head on to his hands, and fixing his eyes upon the MS., began: "Amour et Amitié: drame en cinq

actes," proceeding with the list of the *dramatis personæ*.

Here is the Argument, as forwarded to me in a letter which I received from Claud about this time.

"Georges and Victor de Sancerre, cousins and fellow-collegians, celebrate their simultaneous entry upon life in Paris by vows of an eternal friendship, which is not disturbed, in the sequel, by the circumstance that they are both secretly enamoured of Eugénie Delacroix, the playmate of their youth, who has just emerged from her convent, and who is (of course) everything that could be desired in the way of beauty and innocence. The choice of the young lady, and of her parents, falls immediately upon Georges, who has advantages in the way of fortune and good looks which are denied to Victor. The latter, successfully concealing his chagrin and his unsuspected attachment, attends the wedding ceremony, says all the fine things that are expected of friends on such occasions, and magnanimously resolves to do violence to his feelings by remaining a constant spectator of the happiness of the young couple and acting as a jealous guardian of the same. For this Victor, you must understand, is a sober fellow, and knowing his cousin's in-

stability of character, perceives how necessary it may become that he should have a mentor at his elbow. Georges is in due course carried away by the current of Parisian society, begins to neglect his wife, and finally falls under the dominion of Blanche, Comtesse de Charolles, who is the wicked woman of the tale, and whose charms and iniquities you will please to imagine as limitless. Eugénie, disconsolate and forsaken, finds her sole solace in the respectful sympathy of Victor, whose efforts to reclaim the erring Georges have only resulted in bringing about a coolness between the two friends. Accidentally discovering at the same moment Victor's long-hidden love and her husband's infidelity, she throws herself into the arms of the former, implores his pardon for all the pain that she has caused him, and entreats him, in the most eloquent language, to take her away from her misery. Victor, upon this, comes out very strong indeed. After a prolonged and desperate struggle with himself—'No,' says he; 'I renounce all that you offer me for three good reasons. You love your husband; you do not love me; and I—I love you both!' Now, in the midst of this affecting scene, at the very moment when Victor is imprinting his first kiss —the kiss of renunciation, you know—upon

Eugénie's forehead, who should come striding in but Georges himself? Madame de Charolles has, all this time, been quieting the troublesome conscience of her lover by insinuating doubts as to the fidelity of his wife and his friend; and it is through a wily stratagem of hers that he is enabled to arrive just in the nick of time, and to obtain this convincing proof of their treachery. Recriminations, threats—finally, explanations, and pardon of the repentant and remorseful Georges. Victor, deprived at one blow both of the love and of the friendship which had made his life endurable, announces his speedy departure for the deadly climate of Sénégal, and is about to retire, when Eugénie stops him. 'Stay with us,' she cries; 'what have you, or we, to fear? You have shown that with you friendship and duty are stronger even than love. Stay—to be the good genius of my husband, the guardian angel of the home which you have restored to us. Stay till we have found you a wife more worthy of you than I could ever have been.' And Georges chimes in with, 'Yes, my friend; I ask of you this last sacrifice.' Whereupon, down comes the curtain."

It will be at once surmised, from the above bare outline, that the author must have based

his hopes rather upon incident and dialogue than upon strength of plot. Such was in fact the case; and in so doing, Claud had chosen advisedly. He had intended that the chief figure upon his canvas should be that of Madame de Charolles, and his object had been to represent in her a type of that absolute profligacy which has contrived in our day to co-exist with refinement and an unexceptionable bearing—a woman with neither heart nor conscience, yet one in whom the inherent ugliness of vice was so softened down as to be perceptible only in its consequences. The other characters in the play were rendered entirely subsidiary to this one, upon which the author had expended an infinity of pains, determining to exaggerate nothing by so much as a hair's breadth, and at the same time to miss no single point that might serve to throw it out into clearer relief. The whole composition was a study, rather than a drama; and as such, it had, no doubt, considerable merit. The only question was whether the study were a sufficiently original and powerful one to hold its own with no other support than a single strong situation and that rigid realism of detail so dear to the modern play-going public.

Claud's limited audience, which, small as it

was, was heterogeneous enough in its composition to afford some clue to the probable decision of a larger assembly, responded enthusiastically in the affirmative. The applause, to be sure, did not always come exactly at the moment when the author expected and coveted it; but the important point was that it came, and that it was evidently spontaneous and genuine. When the reader had brought his task to an end, he was immediately surrounded, and gratified with such a shower of compliments that he was almost stunned by them, and hardly knew whether he was standing on his head or his heels.

"Magnificent!"—"Sublime!"—"It is truth itself. Ah, that *diablesse* de Charolles! I recognized her from the first words." "So did I. The portrait is unmistakable. I used to see a great deal of her once."

They had all seen her. And yet, Heaven knows that she was imaginary; and even very imaginary. It would have required a far more conceited man than our modest hero to be able to listen long to this kind of thing with complacency. He was glad to think that his first step had been attended with success; he was grateful to his critics for their praise; but it was no small relief to him when they

began to show signs of exhaustion. Then he remembered, with some uneasiness, that M. Poinsot's voice had not made itself heard in the chorus. That gentleman, however, took an early opportunity of explaining his silence.

"I wanted to leave the verdict to them," he said. "If I had given them a lead, they would have followed me, like so many geese on a common. I congratulate you, my friend. I think your play will do. You are no longer afraid of facing Leroux, eh? Did I not tell you how it would be?"

And shortly afterwards M. Poinsot, who at that moment was refreshing himself with a slice of *galantine* and a glass of wine, was observed to laugh under his breath, as at some diverting reminiscence.

"Why do you laugh?" asked Claud, suspiciously.

"I was thinking of your Victor. What a good fellow! what a loyal consoler of the afflicted! Only, if I had been in his place——"

"You would have spoilt my drama," said Claud, laughing too. "Don't be afraid; if ever I put you into a play, you shall not be exposed to Victor's temptations."

And truly those who are acquainted with M. Poinsot are aware that, though he knows

the meaning of friendship as well as most men, his conception of the sentiment would hardly be likely to carry him to such extreme lengths as were attained by Claud's immaculate hero.

END OF VOL. II.

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